
TOKYOPOP
Vol.3 Harald's Archetype
.hack//G.U.™
Story Tatsuya Hamazaki
Illustration Yuzuka Morita

# .hack//G.U.™

## VOL_03:HARALD'S ARCHETYPE


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LIGHT
NOVELS

A TOKYOPOP® Prose Novel

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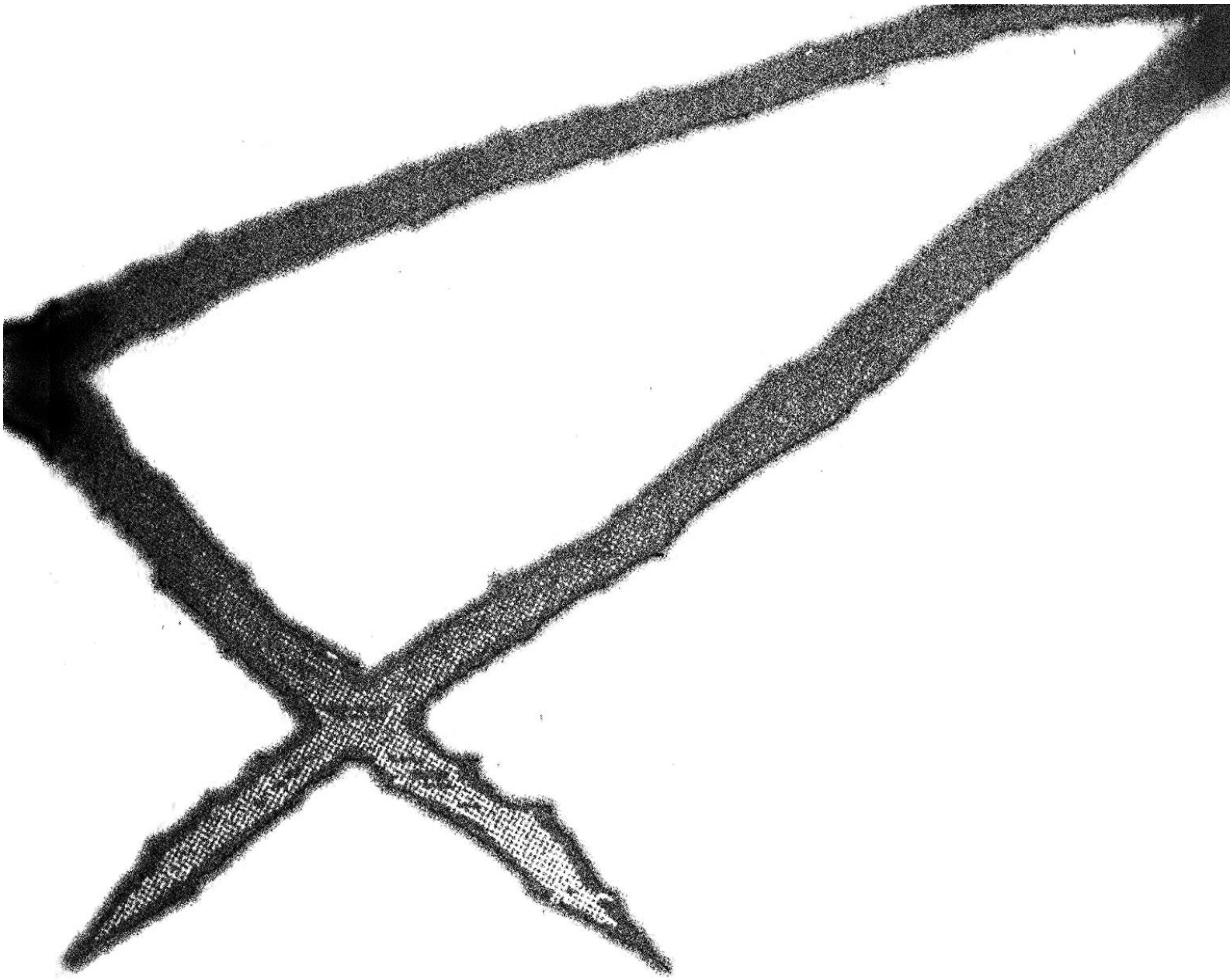
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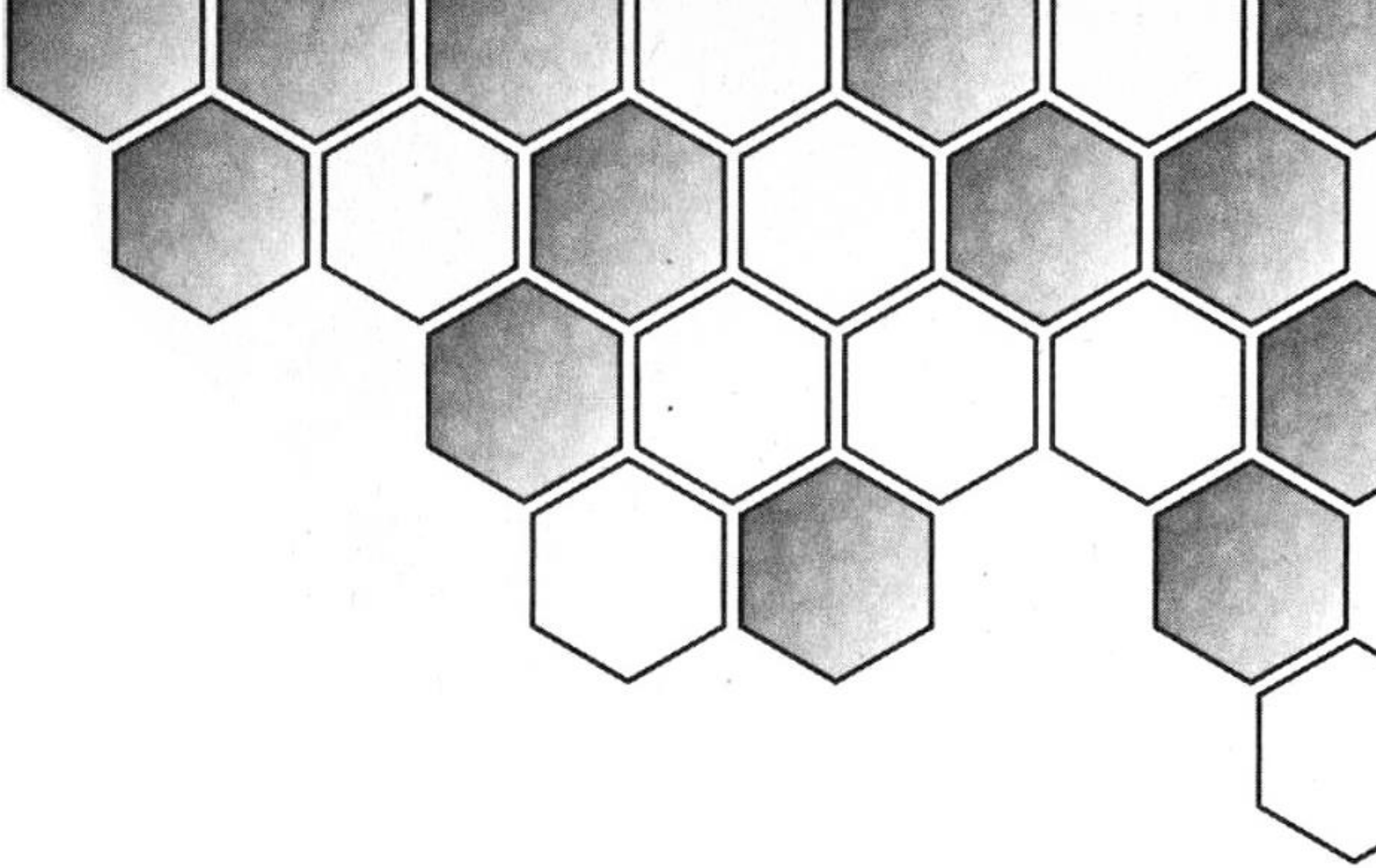
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# .hack//G.U.™


It was an Avatar fight. Through their extraordinary battle, they would achieve true understanding of each other.





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# .hack//G.U. MAIN CHARACTERS



## ATOLI

A Harvest Cleric of the pacifist guild, Moon Tree. Haseo saved her from being PKed.



## HASEO

PKK The Terror of Death. Is chasing the PKer, Tri-Edge, after he made Shino fall unconscious. Epitaph User of Avatar Skeith.



## PI

An engineer of The World, employed by CC Corp. Epitaph User of Tarvos, The Avenger.



## KUHN

A young man who wants to do what is right. Saved Haseo from the mysterious AIDA.



## YATA

Leader of the G.U. team, employed by CC Corp to tackle the AIDA. Uses a system called the Serpent of Lore, which allows him to view everything in The World.



## OVAN

Former master of the adventuring guild Twilight Brigade, to which Haseo used to belong. Haseo hasn't seen him for half a year.



## AZURE KITE

The mysterious and illegal PK that Haseo is pursuing. He wields three-bladed weapons and can utilize the illegal power, Data Drain.



## SHINO

Member of Twilight Brigade with whom Haseo was close. Half a year ago she was PKed by Tri-Edge and has since been in a coma.

# PROLOGUE

2017, SUMMER

The largest Internet game, *The World: R2,* is in turmoil after several strange incidents wherein players fall unconscious during play.

CyberConnect Corporation has established Project G.U. to manage the mysterious AIDA virus, which has been using the network as a means for mass infection. They have hired a few players with unusual powers to handle the situation. These players, called "Epitaph Users," are able to link their souls with their in-game characters and wield weapons called "Avatars." The source of their power comes from the ingenious game creator Harald Hoerwick's final legacy, the Morganna Factors. These Factors shall cause the three-way story between the players, CC Corp, and AIDA to take a dramatic change one headed toward a breakout.

Tomonari Kasumi and his PC, the Lord Partizan Kuhn, worked for G.U. The problem with the AIDA had brought him in direct contact with the mysterious underground hacker, Ovan. After coming into contact with him, Kuhn was forcibly transported away from the Root Town where

he had been. Kuhn was taken to an undiscovered Lost Ground through an outer dungeon, invisible to the eyes of the system administration.

## Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN VIRGIN PEAKS: THE RINGING PEAKS OF AL FADEL

The bright lightning struck like spearheads piercing through rumbling storm clouds. Wind and hail beat against the perilous cliffs and across the enormous, steep mountain range. Rain quickly turned to ice, creating a blinding hailstorm. The storm made it impossible to discern whether it was night or day. Kuhn could feel the cold biting at his face as he stood on the open terrace.

"Where is this?" Kuhn wondered aloud.

"The Virgin Peaks, the Six Ringing Peaks of Al Fadel," said the Steam Gunner Ovan, who was standing beside him.

This was an undiscovered Lost Ground.

"The Six Ringing Peaks?" Kuhn repeated. That was beyond the border of the world. One could think of this mountain range as the roof of *The World*. Beyond the mountains with their freezing wind, snow, valleys, and icy rivers stood the towering Al Fadel, the largest mountain in the game. Giant boulders stood at the peak of the mountain ridge, which cut through the sea of clouds, and up beyond those boulders loomed an epic tower. It looked as if someone had built a skyscraper on top of the twenty-six thousand-foot tall Mount Everest. Only the gods of old, a great giant, or a wise man with vast magical ability could

ever accomplish such a feat. Kuhn was literally on top of the world. When Tomonari gazed out from the top of the tower, he could feel his legs turn to jelly for a split second. Never mind the fact that this was only an online game.

“Do you remember what I asked you at Morrigu Barrow Wall when we were in the AIDA server?” Ovan asked.

*What is on the other side of this wall?* Tomonari quietly whispered, repeating Ovans question.

If the Six Ringing Peaks of Al Fadel were the roof of *The World*, then Morrigu Barrow Wall formed its walls. Exactly what was on the other side of those walls, though?

“Real and a game. Now and the past. Men and women. Friend or foe. They all have boundaries. Where do they start? All can be found in the Lost Grounds,” Ovan said as he stared off into the far distance from his perch on the tower in the Six Ringing Peaks of Al Fadel.

The thick black clouds whirled about the vast sky. This was the highest level any player could reach in the game. Although one would think reaching the game’s apex would be alluring, this place had a way of repelling players.

“People who see this have wisdom,” Ovan proclaimed. The Steam Gunner’s abnormal left arm was covered in a barrel-like cast.

It must have been some form of cheat, because that type of PC customization didn’t exist in *The World*.

Approximately where his elbow should've been was a giant lock. The design made it seem as if he were trying to keep the cast shut and tightly secured. Kuhn couldn't help but wonder what would happen if the lock was ever removed.

"But you can't just rely on senses. You have to be wise to the world," said Ovan before explaining to Kuhn that his story would be formed around how the young man would use his power, not about the power itself.

"What?" Tomonari felt an overwhelming need to exercise caution.

"Your eyes. Use them." Ovan's left arm twitched. "Look. Take it all in. This is the pinnacle of truth in *The World.'*

"Huh?"

All of a sudden, a pitch black wind roared against the tower, tearing a hole through the storm clouds. Information turned into light and flooded down upon Kuhn, burning him.

"Aaaaaaaahhhhhh!" Kuhn screamed in agony. It felt as though someone had forced open his eyes and made him stare directly into the sun, or as if his retina were being broiled in an oven. The pain was unbearable.

Everything Kuhn saw was etched directly into Tomonari's mind without ever passing through the M2D.

"Gaaahhh!" he wailed, trying to hide his face with his hands.

The large band that had been holding Kuhn's hair back broke loose. His tousled blue tresses fell down against his back.

"I see it was too much for you," said Ovan from behind Kuhn.

"Wh-what did you *do*, Ovan?"

"Absolutely nothing. You're the one who looked, Kuhn. Life can be tough when your vision is too good. But I'm sure you'll adjust soon enough."

*What the heck just happened?* Tomonari was at a complete loss. When the pain hit, he lost all sense of his body in the real world, yet he wasn't sure he was Kuhn, either. It felt as though his infinitely magnified perception had taken complete hold over him—as if he'd turned into an eye looking out over *The World.*

"Tell me, Kuhn. What did you see?" Ovan asked, sounding like a doctor interrogating his patient. He wanted to know how things appeared from atop the Six Ringing Peaks of Al Fadel. In an effort to alleviate the pain, Tomonari explained what he saw through written text rather than verbally.

"Heaven and Earth . . ."

The world was born from the heavens and the Earth.

"Interesting," Ovan replied, highly intrigued. "So you were able to catch a glimpse of the workings of this world from up here? What separates Heaven from Earth?"

*It's a ring.*

Tomonari saw everything, and from what he witnessed, he learned the truth. This world was nothing more than a garden kept in a little box. Morrigu Barrow Wall formed a giant ring, which encompassed all the towns and fields. Everything was trapped within these circular walls.

*"Morrigu Barrow Wall has no beginning and no end. If you want to find out, why don't you go? What is carved into your heart ... is not something that I know."*

The song sounded as if a drunkard were singing it. Kuhn knew that he'd heard it somewhere before. Morrigu Barrow Wall formed a barrier that separated the "inside" from the "outside." In essence, it encapsulated the entire world within its circular domain.

Ovan persisted with his questions as he asked, "What did you see outside the wall?"

"Nothing ..." And there was *absolutely* nothing. It was like using to see the far reaches of the ever-expanding universe, which was already billions of light years away. Beyond the all-encompassing Morrigu Barrow Wall was a light so brilliant that it surpassed the player's mental capacity.

"Kuhn, is that as far as you could see, even from up here on the Six Ringing Peaks? Even with your incredible vision?"

It was similar to gazing out beyond the horizon. Regardless of whether something's there, it might as well not exist if it can't be seen.

"You and your keen eyes have proven the heliocentric theory to be accurate being that the Morrigu Barrow Wall forms a giant ring, a crystal-clear telescope

That's wonderful, Kuhn!" Ovan said enthusiastically, making sure that Kuhn felt complimented.

"What happened to my eyes? I can't see, but I. . .

*I see too much,* Kuhn said to himself Even when he tried to close his eyes, it felt as if vast amounts of information in the form of light were bombarding them, incinerating his brain.

"This is your power as an Epitaph User," Ovan responded.

"Your power allows you to perceive the world unlike any other. The more your PC merges together with your mind, the greater your player's abilities as an Epitaph User become. Atoli, for instance, has amplified hearing. And you, Kuhn, have amplified sight."

"But that's—"

*"Mourn as you will, for there is no Heavenly Path. Who would ever have believed that Morrigu Barrow Wall formed a giant ring?"*

Tomonari wasn't quite sure how to react as he listened to Ovan sing a song he'd clearly just made up.

" 'No Heavenly Path'?" Apparently Ovan had read the graffiti someone had etched on the tower walls. The graffiti was proof that someone had made it here before them.

"That's only part of the settings. We're all searching for the same thing. I am . . . and so are you," said Ovan.

"I'm not really—"

"Oh, but you are. 'The Heavenly Path' and the 'Key of the Twilight' may have different names, but they're one and the same. Kuhn, I know that you want to become a hero—a knight in shining armour—but in order to become one, you must first be loved by the gods and goddesses in Heaven. Aura must love you."

*Just like Kite and Balmung,* Kuhn thought. He wanted the Goddess to love him.

Ovan, a hacker shrouded in mystery, was searching for the ultimate AI, Aura, just like Yata and G.U. were.

Ovan knelt down on his knees and gently placed his hand on Kuhn's arched back. "Come," he said calmly. "I respect who you are and I want to help you reach your fullest potential."

His words implied that helping Kuhn was something Yata would never do. Tomonari found himself unable to resist Ovan's offer once it sunk in.

*When one points their finger to the moon,*
*Oh ye fool,*
*Shall gaze upon the fingertip.*

—Epitaph of Twilight

# CHAPTER 01: MOON TREE

## ONE

Ryou Misaki was at the hospital visiting Shino Nanao. Shino fell unconscious in the real world after getting PKed while playing *The World.* She's been asleep in her hospital bed for more than six months.

It all transpired in the winter.

*To save you, I'll. . .*

It was summer now.

Ryou thought about what he needed to do and took action.

He avoided and rebuffed people who were all talk and treated them with contempt when he had to associate with them. He was trying to prove himself and his feelings for Shino through his actions in *The World.*

He was fighting for his memories of that winter day when he'd met Shino for the first time in a little Ikebukuro cafe. He'd expressed his love for her then and sacrificed half a year of what should've been a magical time for a seventeen-year-old boy. He sacrificed everything for this girl sleeping before him. His love had cost him his life.

He'd kept his trips to the hospital a secret from both his parents and his classmates, who didn't even know Shino existed. Somehow that fulfilled a desire in Ryou to keep Shino all to himself.

He knew that only Haseo could truly understand what Shino was going through as a Lost One. He was the one who could save her, not these doctors. He'd become someone special to Shino, just as he'd always wanted, even if it was in a distorted fashion.

*I was supposed to be forgiven for everything I've done.*

In his world, where there was no one but Haseo, Shino, Ovan, and his arch enemy, the PK Tri-Edge, Ryou had been forgiven. Haseo, who was feared as the Terror of Death, was like a monk who had cut all worldly ties. So long as he followed Shino, his guiding star, he could walk without fear or hesitation. There was no need to get involved in complicated trivialities.

*And then I hurt someone.*

Ryou hurt the Harvest Cleric, Atoli, whose PC looked exactly like Shino's PC. He did it to save Shino. No—in truth, he hurt her solely to protect himself. He was weak like warped glass, parts of him too thick while other parts of him were too thin. He was like a clam, closing his shell whenever he encountered something he wasn't keen on or didn't agree with. He was incapable of dealing with a Shino he didn't understand.

*I hurt Atoli and nearly dumped all of the blame onto Shino.*

He was drowning in his own self-pity, yet couldn't allow himself to put an end to it.

*Don't look away.*

He had to continue if he was going to see his precious Shino's face again.

*I will never forget my feelings for you . . .*

He had to keep fighting.

*Tri-Edge. . .*

He had to fight against the one who'd carved all these signs.

*If Shino's soul has left her body and is lost somewhere in the 'ne ... in* The World . . .

Without warning, a young nurse entered the hospital room.

She was well accustomed to seeing Ryou and nodded her head in greeting.

"Can you believe it's already time for the *Obon* Festival of the Dead?" asked the nurse before inquiring about whether Ryou would be going back to his hometown for the holiday.

It was the middle of August. There would probably be a rush of people trying to get home for the holiday this weekend. It was a bit sad, but even the hospital seemed less lively than usual.

"No, not this year."

"You're right; you *are* a second-year student," the nurse quipped, assuming that Ryou must have summer classes as was typical for most kids in his grade. She explained that she was stuck on call for the holiday, so she wouldn't be able to return to her hometown either. Her family was located in Yamaguchi, where her father was a medical doctor. Hospitals out in the country actually got more crowded during *Obon.* Kids who were visiting family in the country would get stung

by jellyfish while swimming in the ocean or would get burned by fireworks. Whenever she went back home for the holiday, her parents would insist that she help out. They were also searching for Mr. Right for her.

"Are there ghosts around the hospital during *Obon?"* Ryou asked.

The nurse cocked her head in surprise over Ryou's rather childish question. "I guess," she whispered before confessing that they actually did see some on occasion. Although sightings were never made public, hospitals always had their fair share of ghost stories.

"It's a border, after all," Ryou said in a hushed tone.

The nurse gave Ryou a quizzical look.

The hospital was a place where people were born and died; it was a border between life and death. To top it off, it was *Urabon*—the season when people welcome spirits from the other side.

There was a new flower in the vase. The seven snow white daisies already in it had begun to wilt due to the heat of the hospital room. Someone had placed a single red flower amongst the daisies.

Toward the end of 2014, Aura, the ultimate AI that had been watching over the worldwide network, was lost to the world. As a result of her disappearance, CC Corporation was unable to maintain its network load and fell into the dark ages. The upper management at CC Corp was fighting for the company's supremacy with the second generation of the game. They created the top-secret group referred to as Project

G.U., which was supposed to push for the revival of the ultimate AI.

This plan was referred to as the RA Plan.

The genius who gave birth to the ultimate AI, Harald Hoerwick, had used the MMORPG *The World* as a means for sampling human

thought. His final creation before he died was the Black Box, which was composed of eight Morganna Factors. Project G.U. was supposed to analyze the Black Box and use its Morganna Factors to revive the ultimate AI. They were placed in charge over the entire project and given initiative over the network. That's how truly great Aura's specs and potential were.

Jun Banshouya, a lead engineer at CC Corp, had led G.U. through various experiments. However, the research eventually came to a dead end. After a series of accidents and twists-and-turns, the CC Corp officials had decided to fully entrust the program to Yata.

He maintained his authority over the program thereafter.

It seemed that Yata's current research focused on the Epitaph User-PCs, which each held a piece of Aura's powers. He was using this research in his fight against the AIDA.

…

Raven @HOME Serpent of Lore

The Uroboros circled.

Project G.U. had been supplied with CC Corps highly integrated observation system, the Serpent of Lore. It was placed directly under Yata's supervision.

Live footage was displayed on windows that seemed to form a large information tree. From these windows, one could see towns, areas, PCs—every aspect of life in *The World* was on display. But the hidden cameras now showed footage that didn't fit in with the norm: bubbles.

Black bubbles, secreted from the AIDA virus that was attacking *The World,* were seeping out of the walls in caves, up from the bottom of lakes, and even out of the distant sun. No one knew the source of the festering globules. Only through the realization that they were a type of virus would G.U. be able to establish a means to deal with them. AIDA used the network for transmission purposes and infected whatever data within *The World* fell into its grasp. When a piece of data became infected, it started to show abnormalities. If a monster was infected, it became an irregular AIDA monster and attacked helpless players. If that's all it did, then it would be nothing more than a computer virus and get written off as an annoying bug.

What made the AIDA so troublesome was its ability to infect PCs. Once a PC was infected, irregularities would start to appear in that player in the real world as well as online.

It had the potential to infect their minds. That was the root of the problem with AIDA. The CC Corp officials made a proclamation based upon Yata's theory: The AIDA virus had become intelligent.

“The development of the intelligent AIDA virus seems to be progressing at an alarming rate,” Pi reported. The Tribal Grappler wore a revealing outfit complemented by pink pigtails and eyeglasses. She continued to read the report aloud as the Serpent of Lore projected videos related to the material.

Pi was presenting the report to her superior, Yata, a muscular

Macabre Dancer who reminded her of a Buddhist monk. He stood on a lotus-shaped platform, which was a display of his position as supervisor. The Adept Rogue, Haseo, and the beautiful Blade Brandier, Endrance, were also listening to the report.

Wearing a hat adorned with roses, Endrance was a portrait of elegant beauty. He was fragile and refined, more like what one would expect from an event character than an actual player. He was proof of exactly how much his player was dedicated to the game. The fact that he’d spent more than half his life playing *The World* on the ’net probably had something to do with it.

Endrance’s real name was Kaoru Ichinose. He was a twenty-year old self-proclaimed recluse with a residence in Kanagawa. He didn’t go to school or work. He’d abandoned life in the real world, so there was no concern that he might tell others about what happened here. In a recent conversation, he’d decided to tell them about himself. Kaoru Ichinose truly lived in the ’net as much as he lived for it.

Endrance had been infected by AIDA for a while, but in the time since he’d become infected, he fought against Haseo and his

Avatar at the Demon Palace Arena. After the battle, he went into a coma, but was saved during the recent AIDA server incident.

Although he wasn't an official member of G.U, he would often hang out at Raven's @HOME.

Ryou was surprised that the hardheaded Yata tolerated Endrance's flippant behaviour. Yata was an elite in his field, so Haseo fully expected Yata to find a recluse utterly repulsive. But then Endrance continually ignored Pi whenever she nagged at him, so he may have decided that showing respect was a waste of time.

"There are countless threads popping up on the forum about people who've seen illegal monsters or black bubbles, both of which we believe to be linked with the AIDA," Pi stated crisply.

There were so many anomalies, and so many people noticing them.

"Is it a repeat of what happened seven years ago?" Yata whispered to himself.

*The World* had suffered from numerous data abnormalities in 2010, the same year the physical world was going through the Second Network Crisis. The international crisis was actually caused by *The World*. There were incidents back then where people lost consciousness and turned into Lost Ones, just like they were now. Ryou had learned all about this from the *Banshouya Tiles*, which were written by the leader of the original Project G.U.

Yata and Pi, another worker for CC Corp, were well aware of this. Endrance had been an active participant in the

Morganna Incident seven years before as the Wavemaster Elk in the first version, so he was also familiar with the correlation.

"What about Atoli's player losing her hearing?" Ryou asked.

"We don't know how to cure it. Atoli s player has already been placed under CC Corp's custody. Naturally, neither she nor her family is aware of this," Pi answered.

"We need to research how Epitaph Users and their players gain heightened senses," Yata said matter-of-factly.

All the Serpent of Lore's information windows closed simultaneously before shifting to different footage.

Phase I—Skeith—The Terror of Death, held by Haseo
Phase 2—Innis—The Mirage of Deceit, held by Atoli
Phase 3—Magus—The Propagation, held by Kuhn
Phase 4—Macha—The Temptress, held by Endrance
Phase 5—Tarvos—The Avenger, held by Pi

The video was now displaying each of the Epitaph-PCs and their Epitaphs—their individual Morganna Factors.

"The fact that Atoll's player has lost her hearing indicates that there's a relationship between the Morganna Factors and the human senses. Remember, she used to have the ability to hear the sounds AIDA emitted," said Haseo.

"I have a heightened sense of smell," Pi confessed.

"A heightened sense of smell?"

"That's right, Haseo. *The World* uses an M2D to output audio and video. In other words, it's a device that plays off of sight and sound. Throughout video game history, most games relied on these two senses to create a fabricated reality, although there were a few exceptions several decades ago that

incorporated vibration. But despite all of this, when I started playing *The World* as Pi, I began to smell things here."

The effect even influenced her in the real world, giving her an abnormally acute sense of smell.

"So you're like a dog?"

"I'd rather you compared me with a perfume specialist," Pi said with a snort.

Haseo couldn't help but wonder what type of smells she must be surrounded by in an online game like *The World*. Could she smell something burning whenever someone cast a fire spell? Whatever the case may be, it was a sensation that normal players must have a hard time even imagining because it was so beyond the scope of standard game play.

"Then I have a heightened sense of touch?" Endrance asked as he stared down at the palms of his hands.

Suddenly the memories came flooding back. It took place at the bottom of the lake in Indieglut Lugh when Ryou had saved Endrance, who was still a Lost One at the time. Haseo was in his third form and Endrance had acted as though his spiky hands hurt when they touched.

"It seems as though the senses that get heightened vary from person to person." Ryou gasped. "People have five senses, or does ESP count as a sixth sense? But there are eight Epitaphs. The numbers don't match up."

"Five—no, six senses." It was unusual for Yata to express interest in something coming from Ryou.

"The sixth sense . . . Then maybe there's a sense for inspiration or guesswork?"

"Haseo, do any of your senses seem as though they've been amplified?"

"Dunno," Ryou replied, making his character shrug. He'd experienced a lot of things in *The World*, but he hadn't noticed anything different about his senses. Unfortunately, he hadn't become more intuitive in the real world and he didn't have any new super powers. The other day, his "sense" of guesswork had been way off during his practice exam. He'd never seen ghosts or witnessed any other supernatural phenomena, either.

"Has Kuhn—come to think of it, where *is* Kuhn?" Haseo inquired.

Pi appeared vexed. "He's late."

Ryou could see Pi docking Kuhn's pay over this. He couldn't help but feel a little sorry for the guy.

"I have little tolerance for this," Yata proclaimed. "Since the AIDA is on the move, we members of G.U. should focus our attention on finding all of the Epitaph User candidates."

"There are only three Morganna Factors left," said Haseo.

"One of those three is Yata," said Pi.

Ryou glanced up at the monk-like Yata on his lotus-shaped platform. It made sense; he just hadn't given it much thought. There was no way that the supervisor in charge of an anti-AIDA program composed of Epitaph Users like G.U would have anything but an Epitaph-PC.

"I have the Sixth Phase, The Prophet, Fidchell," said Yata.

That was his Epitaph. Yata placed the fan he'd been holding on the operations board. "There's still the Seventh Phase; The Machinator; Gorre; and the Eighth Phase, The Rebirth, Corbenik. Since you've already looked over the *Banshouya Files,* you should be well aware that collecting all eight Morganna Factors is Project G.U.'s primary mission. When we lost the ultimate AI, Aura, the network became

vulnerable. Before we can resolve the AIDA problem, we must repair our weakened network system."

To do that, they needed to collect all eight Epitaphs. It was also necessary for all eight of them to be fully awakened Epitaph Users.

*Everything else comes after that.* . . . Ryou groaned silently.

...

## Δ ROOT TOWN: THE ETERNAL CITY OF MAC ANU

Atoli from the guild Moon Tree stood by the end of a large bridge that crossed one of Mac Anu's canals. She wore a camisole dress with pumpkin-coloured shorts, long gloves, and thigh-highs. Every detail of her PC design matched Shino's, even the bird-like wings that draped down her back. Every detail but the colour, that is. Atoli had golden hair and amber eyes, while Shino had silver hair and grey eyes. Also, Shino's outfit was black.

"I still can't hear," the Harvest Cleric admitted meekly.

"I see . . ." responded the Adept Rogue wearing black armour that resembled scaly dragon skin. He was an ominous sight to behold in his third form at Level-133, but in stark contrast, his boyish face maintained an air of innocence.

Haseo, the Adept Rogue, was Ryou Misaki's PC. He was currently collaborating with G.U. and had even been given a debug command. He found himself siding with the system.

AIDA had kidnapped Atoli at the same time everyone got trapped within the server. It stole her Morganna Factor, which was what made her PC an Epitaph-PC. Atoli's player had

been marked as an Epitaph User candidate that was not fully awoken. Her PC used to hold the Second Phase, The Mirage of Deceit, Innis. She regained consciousness after G.U. rescued her, but the AIDA still possessed the stolen Morganna Factor. As a result, her player lost all sense of hearing in the real world.

Despite all of this, she was still able to hear while playing in *The World*, but only through the M2D speakers when she logged on using her PC, Atoli. No one knew how or why, but it was likely that it was somehow connected with the loss of her Morganna Factor. It must have been some sort of side effect from being an Epitaph User, as Epitaph User's souls linked with their PCs.

"I'm going to a different hospital now," Atoli said cheerfully.

"Were you able to find a good doctor?" Ryou asked. He doubted if even the most skilled doctors out there could cure her.

"Sure did. The hospital's kinda far away and they administer all kinds of tests, so it's a little scary."

A thought struck Ryou the second he heard her say that. Pi mentioned that Atoli's player was going to be under CC Corp's care. That meant CC Corp had transferred Atoli's player to a hospital they were associated with either through capital or administration.

"Hey, Atoli, why don't you have G.U. protect you?" Ryou suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"I understand wanting to live a normal life, but G.U.s are the only ones out there who can fix your hearing—not Moon

Tree," said Ryou. "I don't like how the almighty Yata acts, but I think we can trust Pi." He was trying his best to not to push Atoli too much.

*We're the only ones who can get her Innis Factor back from the AIDA*, he thought to himself.

Getting back what was stolen was the only way to heal her.

"Thank you, but I want to stay with Moon Tree."

"It's Sakaki, isn't it?" Sakaki was a counsel member in Atoli's guild, Moon Tree. Until now, Atoli had always been close with him.

"Sakaki has always been there for me. He was there for me before this whole ordeal began. He'll always be there for me." There was never any sign of uncertainty when Atoli talked about Sakaki. Ryou had heard a little about her personal life. In the real world, life had become stressful because things weren't going smoothly with school and friends. So Atoli got hooked on the 'net game *The World* and found Moon Tree, a place where she finally felt at ease. It was there that she met Sakaki and grew to trust and respect him.

When Ryou first met Sakaki, the man had given him a lecture that went against Ryou's personal beliefs. The two got along about as well as cats and dogs.

*But he's important to Atoli. . .*

Sakaki was able to reassure Atoli, which was something Haseo would never be able to do. He had no idea why.

During the AIDA server incident, players panicked when they realized their souls had been trapped within the online game. Members of the violent guild Kestrel launched a PKing spree. Yet in spite of all of this, Moon Tree remained

unaffected and its iron leadership stood strong. They never lost sight of their purpose as a guild.

*Those who believe will be saved ... or something.*

Moon Tree was mocked for its sermons that proselytized the importance of being polite even in 'net games. Atoli yearned for something like that in which she could place her unwavering faith. After all, it seemed as if she was constantly waffling about everything in her everyday life. And wasn't the point of religion to save those who sought salvation?

"Plus, Kuhn asked me to contact him if anything happens."

"I see…"

Kuhn was always there to help if a girl was involved.

"And you'll protect me too, won't you, Haseo?" Atoli added, trying to be cute.

Ryou didn't know what to say. He felt as if she was testing him. Could he really protect Atoli? Could he return her hearing *and* solve the AIDA problem? Too many problems were wrapped up in that single question, and before he realized it, Ryou had missed his opportunity to respond.

"It was a joke," Atoli said with a chuckle. She must have realized how her question had unnerved Ryou. "Besides, you have Shino to protect." With that, she waved before turning her wings to him.

"Yeah . . ."

"I'm going to the Moon Tree's monthly meeting now," Atoli declared as she walked away.

Haseo watched Atoli as she headed toward the dome where the Chaos Gate was located. Within seconds, she vanished into the crowd of PCs. As twilight fell upon the Eternal City of Mac Anu, it shrouded everything in its darkness.

*Why didn't I answer her?*

He would protect her. He *would* protect Atoli. He wished he had laughed and promised to protect her, even if it was a lie.

He was scared of making a promise he couldn't keep.

*Quit trying to protect yourself !*

It was simple: Haseo lacked confidence. He was afraid he would fail—that he would lose both Shino and Atoli.

*I must protect them.*

Ryou buried his sincere desire to protect them deep within.

…

THREE

Moon Tree was one of the large guilds that had received its own unique area for its @HOME. It was the second largest guild after Kestrel, which exceeded five thousand members. The user-governed concern was considered extremely radical for an MMOPRG organization because of the way its members preached about online manners. They were vehemently opposed to anything amoral, including PKing, and were completely devout in their beliefs. Both characteristics contributed to the guild's negative reputation as a religious order amongst regular players. On the forums, there was a distinct division between those who agreed with Moon Tree's beliefs and those who were dead against them.

Moon Tree had played an important role in resolving the AIDA server incident that saw countless players lose consciousness.

However, the only members of the guild who knew about G.U. and AIDA were the Guild Master Zelkova, the captains leading the Seven Counsel, and the Epitaph User candidate Atoli.

• • •

*What does it mean to be yourself?*
*What does it mean to behave like a high schooler?*
*Me, when I wear my school uniform—*

"I'm off!" I always say as I leave the house to catch the 7:22 A.M. bus. I skipped breakfast. I hardly ever manage to find a seat on the overcrowded bus—and I always fight against a wave of anaemia-induced dizziness as I cling to the strap dangling from the buss ceiling.

I walk through the front gate when I get to school. I change into my indoor shoes when I reach the entrance. Once I reach my classroom, I go straight to my desk. I fight to stay awake during my morning classes. For lunch, I get bread from the school store. Then it's time to fight taking an afternoon nap. I bet I'm always so sleepy because I'm lacking important nutrients.

*What does it mean to behave like a daughter?*
*Me, when I'm home—*
*Me, when I'm with my parents . . .*

My father is a salaryman who deals in sales. My mother used to work for a publishing company, but right now she's a

freelance editorial writer. She doesn't write light articles about entertainment or fashion, but stuff for those impossible-to-read journals. I don't want to become like my father. He's quiet and doesn't have any real hobbies. I don't think I can become like my mother. She's so active and businesslike.

I'm an only child. My mother defines me by my test scores and final grades. What am I, a character in a simulation game that she's trying to raise based off a jumble of numbers?

*What does it mean to behave like a normal girl?*
*Me, when I hang out with my friends-—*

I moved on to high school, where everyone started bleaching their hair and piercing their ears. That's just the type of school I tested into. When I said I was going to do what everyone else was doing, my mother started to scream at me. She's so bossy—so hardheaded. I just want to be like all the other girls. It would really take a lot off my shoulders, but my mother only cares about what she wants. She doesn't want me to be happy. She's projecting what makes *her* happy onto me. I know one thing: listening to her won't bring me happiness.

*What does it mean to be yourself?*
*When I wear my school uniform, I'm a high schooler.*
*When I wear normal clothes, I'm a daughter.*
*When I chase after the big trends, I'm a normal girl.*

And when I'm in *The World*, I'm Atoli from Moon Tree. I am Chigusa 'Atoli" Kusaka.

*What does it mean to be a man?*

It’s a member of the opposite gender who notices me—a prince. It’s someone who will always be there for me—someone who won’t hurt me—who isn’t scary. It’s someone who won’t disappear.

*I don’t want to be alone.*

I want someone to be with me forever. I want to give everything I have to my prince. I want him to acknowledge my existence.

*I don’t want to be alone anymore.*

…

## Δ SETTING ETERNITY’S NIGHT MOON

The way its corridors connected to a five-tier pagoda made Moon Tree’s @HOME look like a giant temple. The design was clearly based off of a traditional Japanese *Shinto* shrine.

“Sakaki!”

“You’re late, Atoli,” replied Sakaki.

Atoli swiftly apologized as she made her character bow deeply to the man standing before her. Sakaki was wearing a traditional Japanese half-length overcoat, and with his long hair pulled back, he looked exactly like a handsome samurai. He was second in command at Moon Tree—the one who handled all of the guild business considering their childish Guild Master, Zelkova, was nothing more than a symbol for the organization.

Before departing, Sakaki warned Atoli not to be late the next time. Chigusa gestured for Atoli to follow behind Sakaki.

“How is attendance this month?”

“It’s pretty good. I think its because everyone’s on summer break.’’

All of the guild members were supposed to gather together at the @HOME for their monthly meetings. Hundreds of players had already started congregating in the large reception hall.

“I’m glad to hear it.’’

They were walking through a long corridor that connected the main building to the back of the Counsel Room. The primary purpose of the monthly meeting was for the Seven Counsel to get together and deliberate.

Atoli had the important job of accompanying Sakaki to the meeting. The time they spent together walking down the corridor was sacred to Chigusa. It was a time when they could be alone together. Since Sakaki was in charge of running the guild in de facto, he was almost always busy running errands with Hiiragi or Matsu.

“What do you think it means to be yourself?” Chigusa said to Sakaki’s back.

It had become a silent agreement between the two of them that she would ask him questions and he would answer them as they walked down this hallway. Chigusa felt it was akin to a high schooler asking a fortune-teller for some advice on life. Her questions never seemed to annoy Sakaki and he never chose to ignore them. He always answered her questions quietly.

“Isn’t that you, standing right there?”

“It is ... I know that I belong here in Moon Tree. I am Atoli—I feel the most at ease when I’m Atoli.” She felt safe and secure when she conversed with Sakaki like this.

Merely thinking of Sakaki filled her heart with happiness.

Chigusa didn't know anything about the real Sakaki. However, she strongly believed that her faith in him would never waver, no matter what type of person he may really be.

"Do you feel nervous in the real world?" Sakaki asked.

"I can't find a place where I belong there," Chigusa answered.

"Not at school or at home or with my friends . .." She lacked a place where her soul felt at peace.

"Are you having a hard time keeping up with your studies?"

"When I entered high school, even my parents gave up on me academically." People who attended Chigusa's high school weren't exactly college-bound.

"You aren't running into trouble with bullies, are you?"

"I did a bit when I was in middle school.. . but I changed how

I act around people when I entered high school, so I don't think I really stand out all that much. I'm invisible . . . like air. It's as if I'm already dead and gone."

"In other words, you yourself do not desire to fit in at school."

"Oh . . ." When Sakaki pointed it out, Chigusa realized what he was saying was true.

After her bad experience being bullied in middle school, she'd hit the reset button on how she interacted with people when she entered high school. By acting the same as everyone else, she began to blend in. There were sports at which she was noticeably bad. On Sports Day or any time athletics came up, she would try to make herself invisible so no one would notice her. It was what she'd wanted. In fact, her current situation was exactly what she'd been working toward.

"I bet it's the same for you at home, too. Have you ever tried to play a certain role for your mother and father?"

"My mother is trying to mould me into what she wants, but I hate it."

Chigusa told Sakaki the story about when Chigusa had wanted to pierce her ears.

"So you have a disinterested father and a bossy mother. Sounds like most families to me."

"But—"

"Basically, you want them to leave you alone and let you live your own life. Correct?"

"Uh . . ."

Chigusa's current situation *was* exactly what she'd wanted. She was unsatisfied with how things were, but was unable to break free of the world she created around her.

A garden was visible from the open corridor they were walking through. It was night. The way the lights shone on the stone garden made it look as if they were in the palace on the moon—something out of an old fairy tale.

Sakaki continued, "I don't know how things are for you in the real world, but I know that you have people who understand you here in this game. Even if there are people who disagree with your beliefs, you're able to stand up for them here. It's because you have the End User License Agreement and Moon Tree to back you up. You want to stay in *The World* because Moon Tree is here."

"That's right."

"But that means you're avoiding your problems."

Sakaki remained emotionless as he coolly lectured her like a Buddhist monk might. Atoli didn't care if he agreed or

disagreed with her beliefs. Likewise, it was all right for her to agree or disagree with what Sakaki said. All that mattered was that Sakaki was here and that he would never abandon her.

The long floorboards going down the length of the corridor creaked. That's when Atoli realized something.

*The corridor is .. .*

It was different than it usually was. They should've reached the end of the corridor after all this talking, but the corridor stretched far ahead of them. They kept walking and walking, yet they still hadn't reached the inner building.

Moon Tree's @HOME was designed to look like a dungeon. The Guild Master could release monsters here for training if he wished. Supposedly, he could also edit the dungeon map and would inform everyone about the change through the guild's forum.

"Excuse me, Sakaki, but the corridor is—"

"The corridor in your heart has countless masks hung on the walls," said Sakaki, cutting Atoli short. He continued to walk with his back to her.

"Masks?"

"Like masks you wear at a festival."

Chigusa finally realized that Sakaki had been talking directly to her, not to Atoli.

"Masks . . ." High schooler. Daughter. Friend.

"These masks—personas—only reflect what others think of you."

They hid her inner self and portrayed her as someone else. They were like a type of uniform.

"Like my school uniform?"

"Yes, but it also has to do with colouring your hair and piercing your ears."

Sakaki continued to walk briskly down the seemingly endless corridor. Chigusa used her controller to force Atoli to follow him.

For some reason, she felt winded, but she summoned her strength to continue to follow him.

"But the only mask that fits you perfectly is Atoli of Moon Tree," Sakaki asserted.

"Right . . ."

"What was it you originally asked me?" Sakaki inquired.

"What does it mean to be yourself?"

"Being yourself—your sense of self," Sakaki began. "Your sense *of* self cannot be defined by others. It is defined by how you view yourself, as well as how others view you. But *you*, Atoli, only concern yourself with how others view you."

She would never find her true "self" that way. If she were lucky, she would simply hunt down another mask to wear.

"B-but if that's true, what should I do? All I ever put on are masks I don't want. All I have is Atoli and *The World"*

"Your sense of self and your personas have become estranged. That is why you feel so tortured. Teachers, parents, friends— everyone is expecting something from you. Yet what you desire from yourself is different from what they want from you. Everyone has created his and her own image of you."

"But I—" Just as Atoli began to speak, Sakaki stopped walking. The corridor had finally come to an end and opened up to a stone garden, revealing a red *torii* gate.

"I didn't know our @HOME had a place like this."

"Come," Sakaki directed, ignoring Chigusa, who was unsure what to do.

He walked through the *torii* gate. Silence and solitude filled the darkness.

"It's a *Shinto* shrine," Chigusa whispered.

It was, in fact, a *Shinto* shrine that stood before her. She never knew that a Shinto shrine was located behind the giant Buddhist temple that made up Moon Tree's main building. What type of gods did they worship here?

During the past few years, it had become popular for people to visit official websites run by *Shinto* shrines as a form of worship. They would practice e-manners by making small monetary offerings and purchasing talismans and protective charms at the site. All religions had been engaging in intense debates about whether deities could be reached through the network. Japan was one of the world leaders in high-speed Internet services and accepted the belief that gods or deities lived in all things. As such, most people had grown to accept this electronic form of worship.

Chigusa approached the shrine. "Wow," she mouthed.

White hydrangeas decorated both sides of the path. It was just like one of the old temples in Kamakura. A washbasin for purification stood near the entrance. When Sakaki reached the stone basin filled with clean water, he used his right hand to pick up the ladle that had been left there and dipped it into the water. It was a set motion that his character began to perform by targeting the washbasin. First, he washed his left hand, and then switched hands so that his left hand held the ladle. He then washed his right hand, and switched which hand held the ladle yet again so that his right hand was holding it. He

poured water into his left hand, which he used to rinse out his mouth.

This series of motions was proper etiquette. One had to cleanse himself before he could enter the sacred ground and stand before the gods. Chigusa targeted the washbasin so that Atoli could perform the ritual.

"Wash away your impurities. Away with the impurities in your body, your heart, and your soul," said Sakaki.

"Right."

The water had purified her, washed away all the hatred she felt toward her teachers, her parents, and her friends.

*I am Atoli from Moon Tree . . . I'm happy with that.*

*The World* was the only place where she could live a pure life.

This was her ideal world.

After walking a bit farther in, they reached a forest. Deep within the shrine grounds was a small, stylized shrine.

"Take this."

The item that Sakaki handed her was a sacred *Shinto* wand formed from a branch with holy *Shide* attached to it. *Shide* is sacred origami paper folded to form long zigzag strips. The branch came from a Sakaki Evergreen.

"A Sakaki branch . . ." Chigusa marveled.

"It's a tree where the gods reside. It also represents the border between our worlds." All of that was attributed to the word *Sakaki.*

Chigusa felt as though she needed to straighten her posture when Sakaki handed her the sacred wand. She accepted it

from him as she would have from a priest before approaching the shrine. When she targeted the front of the shrine, Atoli rotated the branch so that the base of it faced her. She prayed before turning the branch around so that it faced the shrine, then she placed the branch down in front of it. After bowing twice, she clapped twice.

"Voice your desires," Sakaki instructed, urging her on.

*My desires* . . . Atoli said silently before making her wish.

"I want to be more confident—to overcome my self-hatred," she

said. "I wish to get over this complex of mine." She bowed once more. With this last motion command, she completed the ceremony.

"A true complex is something of which you are unaware," said Sakaki.

"What exactly do you mean by 'unaware' of it?"

"It's when a person subconsciously reacts to others' emotions. With that in mind, the second you realized what you were doing, it quit being a complex."

"But—"

"You simply have a strong sense of inferiority."

Sakaki's harsh words shocked Chigusa into silence. She didn't know what it meant to be herself because she'd never tried to be herself. Each day she'd open her inner closet and debate over which mask to wear. She'd been living life constantly fretting over how others perceived her.

Sakaki approached the shrine and pointed toward the holy offering of sake and food. "Eat it," he said soberly.

Chigusa contemplated whether she'd be punished for partaking of the sacred offering. "Huh? But—"

"It's part of the *Naorai* sacrament. It's a necessary part of the ceremony if you're to return to the earthly realm after entering the sacred shrine grounds. Consume the power of the gods that reside within those offerings. Gain courage from them."

"Courage . . . Chigusa repeated as she moved Atoli closer to the shrine. A fruit that closely resembled a walnut rested atop the shrine's small platform.

*Dear God . . .*

Chigusa targeted the offering.

…

## THREE

Adventures with newbies were always hectic because newbies tended to be filled with high expectations for the new 'net game.

Generally, most players flipped out whenever they met another kind player. Battles, chats—absolutely everything was new and exciting to them.

"Graaaw!" With a single swipe of his large scythe, he cleared away an entire group of monsters. Not even a swarm of hundreds of these Level-1 monsters stood a chance against Haseo in his Level- 133 form.

"Too kewl!"

"Did you *see* that? He got them all in one hit!"

The two girl PCs squealed with delight over their first experience seeing the destructive prowess of Haseo's powerful scythe. Judging from their equipment, it was obvious that they were newbies. In fact, this was their very first time playing an online game, making them newbs among newbs.

"Haseo!" Sakubo, otherwise known as Bo, merrily bounced over to him. The Shadow Warlock with his crescent-shaped hat was a member of the new players support guild, Canard. Haseo had also become a member of the guild just the other day, and because of his membership, he was stuck acting like good little member of Canard for the day.

The tour for beginners was meant to teach the basics to new players who'd neglected to read *The World's* manual. It would teach them the basics while helping them gam real experience out in the fields. This was Haseo's first time participating in a tour, as Bo usually led the tours alone. Haseo was basically acting as a bodyguard.

"Scythes sure are strong!" the new Harvest Cleric said to Haseo.

"They're good for wiping out small fries ... I guess," Haseo answered politely, out of respect for his position at Canard. He didn't want to embarrass Bo.

"Maybe I should remake my character as an Adept Rogue," said the Twin Blade.

"Don't. I wouldn't if I were you. I mean, uh ... if you want my opinion," Ryou stammered, smiling grimly. He urged her to give up on it because it gave other players the impression

that you were masochistic. An Adept Rogue was a jack of all trades, but never got particularly good at anything.

"But you're way good with it, Haseo."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing!"

The Harvest Cleric and the Twin Blade burst out into laughter, reminding Ryou of the girls at school during break.

"Well, that should give you a feel for battle. Now why don't you two give it a try?" Bo suggested. But the two newbies made such excuses as, "It's scary" or "I'm too tired" to get out of it before moving on to the next conversation.

Ryou found their attitudes scary, but couldn't say as much even if he wanted to.

"So then, do you have any questions?" Bo asked, trying his best to lead the tour.

"It's question time?"

"Oh yeah! Back in town weren't there some players trying to catch people? What were they recruiting for?" asked the Twin Blade.

"Huh?" Bo said quizzically. He must not have understood what she meant by "catch" because he was at a total loss for words.

"They were recruiting? Maybe it was Moon Tree . . ."

"Yep, that's it!"

Ryou knew exactly who they were talking about.

The Harvest Cleric changed her voice in mock imitation as she said, "'Come see Moon Tree if you're ever in need of a helping hand'... or something!"

"What are they—a religion?"

Ryou sighed silently as he watched the girls burst into raucous laughter. All of a sudden, the realization that they didn't know about the Terror of Death dawned on him. They weren't aware that a PKK was right in front of them. They were completely ignorant of AIDA and the Lost Ones. They didn't know anything, basically.

*Was I ever like that?* It would've been only six months ago that he was new to the game. Did Shino and Ovan look at him with disdain the way he did these girls?

Ryou found himself lost in nostalgia about those days.

## Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN BATTLEFIELD: COITE-BODHER BATTLEFIELD

Haseo was at a Lost Ground Ovan had found toward the end of their adventure. Both Haseo's player and his PC had finally started to mature. Still, he couldn't help but feel excited about standing in an undiscovered Lost Ground. It wasn't as if he did all the work finding it, but he was able to share in the glory of discovering this place along with the other members of the Brigade. Because Ryou never participated in class activities or group sports, this feeling of joy was fresh and unfamiliar to him.

It was stormy, but the dry blue sky peeked through holes torn through the dark, menacing clouds, making the landscape overhead particularly eerie. The Earth was shrouded in eternal darkness. Eight stone monuments half-submerged in mud formed a large circle.

"It's Stonehenge," Ryou said in a hushed tone when he saw the ruins that existed in the real world.

"It does resemble it, doesn't it?" Shino smiled. At this point, the Harvest Cleric was still conscious. "This is Coite-Bodher Battlefield... where the horrible battle against the gods took place."

"So then ..."

The battle against the gods occurred when the heavenly gods and the humans waged war against one another. It began when humans sealed the merciful goddess Aurora in Hulle Granz Cathedral in an attempt to protect their land from the dark influence of the Shadow.

"This is where the gods' ultimate weapon, Mag Mell, fought against humanity's eight greatest heroes," Shino sad, prefacing the story.

It was said that the Battle Dragon Mag Mell was born from a holy mountain during the age of the gods. Its sole purpose was to fight against the humans on behalf of the gods. With a single huff of breath, it could defeat a hundred powerful warriors. The spells people cast on the dragon were unable to fracture a single scale.

When the humans realized they were unable to triumph over the Battle Dragon Mag Mell as it stormed through their lands, they decided to seal it away.

They lured the beast to Coite-Bodher Plains, where they'd prepared a trap to ensnare it. Rather than peacefully accept its

fate after falling into the trap, Mag Mell screamed out, causing a horrific earthquake.

The massive tremor turned Coite-Bodher into a lifeless swamp.

“Hmm,” Ryou muttered half-heartedly.

“That’s why this is called a battlefield.”

“So, what happened to Mag Mell after it was contained?” Ryou asked as he made Haseo survey the area.

The stone plinth had eroded and the glyphs that had been drawn on it were buried m mud.

“So?” When he glanced over at Ovan, he noticed that the

Twilight Brigade’s Guild Master was staring at the sky. Ryou looked through Haseo’s eyes as he turned to see what the man saw through those tinted glasses. An island was—

“Whoa!”

High above the Lost Ground floated an island of solid rock.

Both Ovan and Shino were quietly gazing it, amazed that it had rooted itself in one spot. Suddenly, a flash of comprehension spread across Ryou’s face. The silhouette of the island reminded him of something.

“It’s a dragon?”

A deformed dragon, rather. The petrified Battle Dragon Mag Mell had transformed into an island in the sky. If the legends were true and it really was born from the holy mountain, then its massive size seemed about right.

“What do you think is on top of that floating island?” Ovan asked Haseo.

"Hmm . . ."
"Would you like to go find out?"
"I don't know," Ryou replied, uncertain how to answer.

Ovan offered a wry smile that made Ryou feel as though he were being laughed at. Being laughed at royally annoyed him.
"Perhaps there's an infinite amount of GP, or the ultimate weapon, or an invincible PC design up there," Ryou snapped back in a mock imitation of Ovan.

It seemed as if Ryou was always trying to stand as Ovan's equal when exchanges like this occurred.

"If you found the Key of the Twilight, what would you wish for?" asked Ryou.

But Ovan wouldn't offer a straight answer. "My wish? One must pay a lofty price to have his wish come true," he proclaimed, dodging the question completely. His avoidance of such questions was only part of what made him so strange.

"Huh?"

"Just as Faust sold his soul to Mephistopheles because of his desire for knowledge, all magic has a price if it is to work. The eight heroes may have sealed the Battle Dragon Mag Mell, but the hero Gorre lost his life in the process," Ovan said. "It's believed that only three of the eight heroes survived the war against the gods."



"That's just part of the game's background story," Ryou sighed.

He failed to see the point.

Ovan remained transfixed on the island in the sky as he explained, "Its background story is what makes *The World* what it is." It defined *The World*, but the story also belonged to all of the players.

Haseo wasn't buying it. "Hmph," he mumbled, shrugging.

Ovan sighed like a teacher working with a poor student. He tried explaining it again. "In other words, *The World* is made up of our stories—mine, yours, and Shino's. That's what I think."

"But games are created from programs and data."

"That's a part of it, but there's also another story. There are scenarios—different paths. Where are those different paths?"

Ryou was growing tired of engaging in a conversation he couldn't comprehend, but he was also annoyed that he couldn't answer the question.

"Where there's a will, right?"

Ovan was always saying that.

"That's right," Ovan nodded. "As such, the players as a whole subconsciously desire it. That's the archetype of a story."

"You lost me."

"Then tell me—why do you think that island is a dragon?"

"Why? Because it's a dragon."

"But isn't it actually a floating island? It's a mountain or a boulder in the sky. Neither Shino nor I said that it was a dragon. The reason you thought that it was the petrified form

of the Battle Dragon Mag Mell is because, moments before, you heard the story about the battle that took place here at Coite-Bodher."

"But isn't that part of the premise?"

"It's the archetype—the unseen hand of God."

"I don't get it," Ryou admitted with a defeated look.

Ovan turned toward Shino, and the two smirked at each other. Ryou sensed that he'd just been made to look like a complete idiot in front of Shino, whom he was trying desperately to impress. Now he really was starting to get mad at Ovan.

"You wanted to know what I'd wish for, didn't you?" Ovan asked. "I wouldn't mind giving it to you, Haseo."

. . .

*. . . to you, Haseo.*

What would Ovan give him and why did he say that? Ryou was absolutely clueless. Even if Ovan had asked him what he'd wish for in a hypothetical sense, Ryou doubted he would've been able to answer the question. He probably would've thought of something that had numerical value, such as GP, items, or levels.

He'd be mad to desire something other than that from an online game.

*Epitaph Users . . . Avatar . . . AIDA . . .*

But now Haseo's version of *The World* was teeming with things that had no numerical value. They were things that hid within *The World's* autonomy.

*If the ultimate AI, Aura, really does exist, then I'd pray to her or whatever it took for her to grant my wish.*

He wanted to exterminate the AIDA and save the Lost Ones.

"—ya know?" The newbie Harvest Cleric's voice snapped Ryou back into reality.

"Oh . . . what was that?"

"So like, where can we see one of those black windows?"

Ryou gulped when he heard the Harvest Cleric say "black windows."

"Oh, I know about that!" exclaimed the Twin Blade, jumping right in the conversation. "I got a chain mail about it."

Rumours on the forums spread around via chain mails sent through cell phones. The black windows were becoming something of an urban legend. The legend claimed that anyone who looked through one of the black windows found in *The World* could never come back.

"It's only a rumour. A game can't devour your soul."

"Supposedly people got stuck in the server not too long ago. Didn't that take place in *The World*, too?"

The two new players seemed chipper as their conversation dragged on and on.

*They can never come back.*

It wasn't difficult to figure out that the black windows from the rumours were based on the AIDA bubbles.

"Haseo, do you know anything about it?"

"No," he answered curtly. Ryou figured he should give lying a shot to sound more convincing. "There are thousands of idiotic rumours like that floating around. They may not be outright lies, but I'd take them with a grain of salt, just as you'd do with all those ghost stories you hear." It was a weak attempt at a warning, but it was something.

*"Seriously?* That's lame."
"I don't get it."

It was time to suggest that the group return to town now that the two beginners had lost interest.

"Let's head on back. Can I leave the rest to you, Bo?"
"Sure. Thanks for helping me, Haseo. It made me very happy."

Bo accompanied the two newbies back to the terminal, where they transported out.

*I'm beat. . .* Ryou said to himself.

He tossed his controller aside and stretched out in his reclining chair. His eyes needed a break. Working with beginners was exhausting. He finally understood how hard it must be on Bo, who did this sort of thing all the time. It had been such a painful experience for Ryou. Working with others had ended up being rather stressful, and it proved that Ryou wasn't cut out to be a volunteer.

"Huh?" he gasped.

Ryou realized through his M2D that Haseo had suddenly been surrounded by several PCs—five PCs, to be exact, all dressed as ninjas. As they silently surrounded Haseo, Ryou was gripped by a feeling of tension that he knew all too well. They were PKs. For mthem to have appeared in an area designated for beginners, they must be newb-hunting.

"What do you want?" Ryou asked threateningly. It was his way of taunting them one last time. He selected the debug command and turned on the "Invincible" box that had remained off until now.

Changing his mind, he moved the cursor Over to another command. "Shut Down" was a command that could forcibly log out a normal PC from whatever area they were in. Its true purpose was to quickly evacuate PCs when AIDA posed a threat. But there was no need for him to play with these PKs. Everyone would probably assume they were having issues with the network.

As the five PKs encircling Haseo sprang into attack mode, Ryou executed the command.

*Later.*

The five PKs were shut down a second before their swords could touch Haseo.

But . . .
*"Wha—"*

*Clink!*

The tip of a sword unexpectedly sprang up from underfoot and dug into Haseo's armour.

". . . the hell ?"

Haseo took a step back, thus dodging the main force of the blow. He was holding his Avatar, Skeith, rather than his normal weapons. When he instinctively sensed danger, Haseo must have drawn it in order to counter the threat. His subconscious mind must have recognized the danger the way an "Auto Guard" ability might.

The Avatar had automatically materialized when it sensed danger approaching its Epitaph User. That meant this was . . .

"AIDA?" That was the only enemy that could threaten an Epitaph User.

A black hole formed where Haseo was standing moments before. It was the infamous bubbles. Haseo could see a weapon that resembled a priest's staff through the window that linked to some other world. Several rings decorated the top of the staff. He could also see someone's arm.

It was a messenger from the other side.

A chime quietly reverberated as the decorative rings on the staff hit one another.

Agitated by the surprise attack, Ryou angrily swung Skeith.

"Who's there?" he beckoned as his death scythe cut through the wind.

The staff and arm disappeared into the window. The bubbles that formed the window closed shut, dissolving into the depths of the earth. Skeith's blade sliced at the earth in vain.

*Don't tell me that was an AIDA-PC.*

All of a sudden, an alarm from G.U went off, informing him that they were holding an emergency meeting.

…

FOUR

Sakaki was standing behind Moon Tree's main building, beneath the red *torii* gate.

"Well?" he asked plainly.

The sound of insects filled the dense forest surrounding the shrine.

*Cling, cling . . .*

No other PCs were in sight, but Sakaki continued, as if someone invisible had just reported to him. "So you failed," he said as if complaining to his own shadow, cast down by the light of the moon.

It was obvious that Sakaki regarded the silence as affirmation, because he whispered that it no longer mattered as he continued studying the night sky. The silver moon illuminated the large temple-like pagoda.

"I don't know who he is, but everything happened exactly as he said it would." The man's identity was of little consequence now.

Moon Tree was going to be purged of evil.

The ring encircling the moon was actually a river of black bubbles.

"The magic in the sky seems to hide within the moon," Sakaki continued overdramatically. He truly felt that the magic resided within him now.

*Cling.* The buzzing of the insects suddenly ceased. Everything fell completely silent.

"Now you won't have to hear all that noise. There's no need to hesitate. All you have to do is obey me," Sakaki said benevolently to the person standing on the other side of the *torii* gate. He could hear something large fluttering in the darkness of the shrine.

*Let's go, Atoli.*

...

Raven @HOME Serpent of Lore

Fuzz filled the information windows that had been left open. All of the windows were sounding the emergency alarm, heightening everyone's anxiety. Although Pi was dealing with the situation, the

The Serpent of Lore was in turmoil.

*" What* did you say?" Ryou's voice boomed.

Yata was on his lotus-shaped platform, completely absorbed in whatever he was working on at the control panel.

"Moon Tree's @HOME has vanished." Not even the Serpent of Lore could locate it.

*"Wha—?"*

"It's lost." The area had literally disappeared off the face of the system. It had to be an AIDA phenomenon.

"Kaede from Moon Tree informed us about this. She's waiting for us in Raven's @HOME lobby," said Pi, who was eager for Yata to tell her what her next step should be.

*Kaede ... Is it Kaede from the Seven Counsel?*

Kaede was the Third Division Captain. Ryou remembered her as a gentle female PC in traditional Japanese-style clothing. She'd sent G.U.'s dummy guild, Raven, a message informing them about the irregularities occurring at Moon Tree.

"Go meet with her," Yata ordered.

Haseo accompanied Pi to her meeting with Kaede. The Third Division Captain was already waiting for them by the time they reached the hall leading to Raven's @HOME. Their @HOME was meant for a small guild. It resembled what someone would expect a basement garage to look like in this steam city. Who would ever imagine that deep within hid the Serpent of Lore?

Yata was not going to welcome a normal PC like Kaede into the administrative-side of their base, nor would he come out and meet her in person. In fact, Ryou had never seen Yata leave the Serpent of Lore.

Kaede remained completely silent, unable to bring herself to speak. It appeared as though she was unsure of how to convey something.

"What happened at Moon Tree?" Pi asked, trying to lead Kaede on.

Kaede finally began to. talk. “I’ll get straight to the point: Sakaki betrayed Zelkova.”

Her matter-of-factness was unexpected.

“He was *betrayed”* said Pi.

Moon Tree was split into two factions—the faction that supported their Guild Master, Zelkova, and the faction that supported the second in control, Sakaki. Although, outwardly, the guild appeared to run smoothly, there were supposedly fierce currents causing haste underneath.

*So Moon Tree members are fighting amongst themselves?* Pi wondered.

That was a problem for the guild and its members, but it was of no concern to G.U., which worked at the system level.

“Kaede, tell us—what did you see?” Pi asked in a low voice, trying to clarify what was happening. Their @HOME had been completely lost, but there was no way a silly little squabble could’ve caused that to happen.

“Zelkova was PKed,” Kaede replied timidly.

“PKed?”

“It wasn’t a normal PK ... it was ... a monster,” Kaede stammered. She was visibly distressed.

“A *monster* did it?”

“Sakaki encouraged the monster to eat Zelkova.”

And then Moon Tree was lost. Only one thing came to mind. Ryou decided to send Pi a personal chat, asking for her opinion.

>>THINK IT WAS AIDA?
>>MOST LIKELY.

The AIDA virus must have infected the monster, making it an illegal monster. But what was this about Sakaki controlling it?

"I've heard that G.U. investigates unusual happenings in *The World*. What was it called again—the AIDA phenomenon?" Kaede asked. "Also, Zelkova was most insistent that if anything were to happen to him, I should seek help from Haseo."

"Zelkova wants my help?" said Haseo. That was surprising. It sounded as if Zelkova had taken a real liking to Haseo, but he had no idea why.

"I was unable to protect Zelkova," Kaede confessed, trembling with guilt and fear. "I shamelessly ran for my life."

Judging by her timing, she must have escaped from her @HOME moments before it disappeared.

Ryou didn't know a whole lot about Kaede, except that she was in the Zelkova faction and against the Sakaki faction. He had the impression that she was an exceptionally strong woman who'd supported her childish Guild Master with all her heart. Now Kaede's voice trembled as she spoke of the master s death, even though it was only an online game. Her heart was in turmoil.

"Leave this to G.U.," Pi said, urging Kaede to log out.

"What about Atoli?" Ryou asked. He recalled Atoli mentioning she'd be attending Moon Tree's monthly meeting today.

"Was Atoli there, too?" inquired Pi, her voice going up an octave.

“Was Atoli—? Yes, she was there,” Kaede answered. Her next words would prove absolutely devastating. “The monster . . . was Atoli.”

Ryou didn’t understand what Kaede was saying. He was stunned speechless.

Yata opened a private guild chat. He wanted G.U. to infiltrate he currently missing Moon Tree @HOME.

…

## Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN BULWARK: MORRIGU BARROW WALL

Moon Tree’s @HOME had disappeared from the system. Naturally, that meant that they couldn’t transport there with a Chaos Gate, nor could they get there with the debug command.

“That shows how much the AIDA has advanced. Now it can trap a specific area and players in its server,” said Pi.

“AIDA must hate us,” Endrance giggled.

The infiltration team, composed of the Epitaph Users Haseo, Pi, and Endrance, gathered around the Lost Ground Morrigu Barrow Wall.

“Kuhn’s late again . . .”

“I bet that idiot’s wasted at a party somewhere,” Ryou quipped.

Pi sniffed indignantly at Ryou’s words. That wasn’t the thing to be doing at a time like this. The path of promotion from a lowly part-timer to a full-time employee suddenly grew a little longer.

As soon as everyone arrived, Pi held a quick briefing.

"We believe that the Moon Tree @HOME is currently in a small-scale AIDA server," Pi explained. "Unlike last time, it isn't targeting random PCs." The AIDA, an intelligent virus, was targeting specific PCs, and it had purposely gone after Moon Tree.

"Why did AIDA pick out this group of players?" Ryou asked.

"This is Yata's theory: He believes that the last AIDA server was for observation. This time it is for *experimentation"* Pi replied.

Ryou shuddered at the thought that AIDA was experimenting with people s minds. *Crap!* he thought. *Atoli is somewhere in Moon Tree.*

Yata had analyzed the situation and decided it would be best to apply what they learned from the previous incident with the AIDA server. They would have to use another sign. The signs were interconnected, like an ant hive. It was like a Chaos Gate for AIDA.

The three of them stood in front of the sign at Morrigu Barrow Wall.

"Were going to enter a realm parallel to *The World"* Pi said to Haseo and Endrance before initializing the transport program.

"We're going on the other side of the Wall," Endrance added.

"This is a shortcut to the parallel world," Pi whispered, sniffing the fragrance emanating from the other world.

"Hows it smell?" asked Haseo.

"Sweet—like honey," Pi said softly before initiating the sign hacking.

• • •

Yata hadn't left the Serpent of Lore once since being placed in charge of Project G.U. There simply wasn't any need to. He utilized the system to gather information, and there was plenty of information for him to analyze considering how highly integrated the Serpent of Lore was in *The World*. If he needed to exterminate an AIDA, all he had to do was send Pi or Kuhn to take care of it. Should he need to speak with someone, a private chat would suffice.

The only matters of immediate concern to Yata were the AIDA and players that the system couldn't touch, including the illegal hacker Ovan.

As long as Yata stayed within the Serpent of Lore, he was omnipotent in *The World* and could play the role of a wise old philosopher.

"May I help you?" Yata called out over his back from the lotus shaped pedestal.

Someone had bypassed the various security systems protecting the Serpent of Lore. The black cloak the figure wore completely covered his body. His armless outline made his design resemble a chess piece more than a human form.

"The upper management is displeased with recent events," proclaimed the voice in a tone that was clearly meant to belittle Yata.

The condescension indicated that this was a spokesman representing the upper management.

"They have entrusted me to deal with the AIDA. I believe that was the agreement," Yata replied coolly.

"That is correct, however—"

"The company wants results, yes?" said Yata, cutting off the spokesman. "I have recovered six of the Epitaph-PCs that were lost due to the previous G.U.'s failure and the fire from two years ago. They are all under *my* G.U.'s supervision. Do you have a problem with that?"

"The upper management has a problem with you, specifically, Yata," the chess-shaped PC stated.

"I see . . ."

"It is in our best interest for *The World* to run safely and smoothly. We want absolute control over the network. In order to achieve that goal, we must first eliminate all unstable factors, such as the AIDA. That is the purpose of this project and that is the purpose of G.U." Members of the upper management wanted Yata to remember why he'd been given The Serpent of Lore.

"Hmm . . ."

"I expect you want to resolve this problem swiftly and without diversions," declared the chess piece. A moment later, it vanished as it transported out.

The upper management was clearly afraid that the connection between *The World* and the people who'd fallen comatose would be made public. It was impossible for modern medicine to prove such a connection, but the unfavourable rumours that would surely spread could be problematic.

*The World* served twelve million players—practically an entire nation's population. In order to maintain that right, they needed to revive Aura, the ultimate system. Supremacy over the next network generation would be theirs if they succeeded. *The World* was a testing site, with its twelve million players serving as the test subjects. The result of that experiment

would be a new Aura. Her re-creation would have an impact comparable to the industrial revolution or the discovery of the nucleus. Then, the upper management would be powerful enough to rule the world.

...

FIVE

## Δ SETTING ETERNITY'S NIGHT MOON

Two PCs were arguing. The Harvest Cleric argued for a Moon Tree where everyone helped one another. He felt that as part of the endeavour, everyone should be required to completely disarm. Anyone who relied on deterrent power was no better than those violent beasts at Kestrel.

The Blade Brandier also argued for Moon Tree's ideals, but felt that without power, justice was impotent. He accused the Harvest Cleric of being a coward.

One PC was part of the Zelkova faction, while the other was part of the Sakaki faction. There was an ongoing rivalry between the faction that had moderate beliefs and the faction that had heavy-handed beliefs.

The former essentially said to drop dead if you can't comprehend Moon Tree's ideals. The latter said he was no better than garbage if he didn't understand Moon Tree's ideals. Both sides fiercely discriminated against each other and each side claimed that its way was the right way

After the bickering had gone on for some time, the Blade Brandier, who seemed to be on the Sakaki faction, cut down the other player. The Harvest Cleric moaned as he coughed up frothy blood, cursing the other player before dying. He'd been PKed.

Fellow members of Moon Tree stumbled over to the grey corpse and, first, severed his head, then his arms and legs. Suddenly, other players in the garden began squabbling over the same topic. Each argument was brought to an end with an execution. The players dragged the corpses that resembled broken mannequins toward the main building.

Haseo, Pi, and Kuhn completed the sign hacking and were standing before Moon Tree's main entrance. The area had become a breeding ground for arguments and violence. Cursing, belittling, nitpicking, lying—the message windows were filled with all sorts of verbal traps and abuse.

"My heart feels cold," Endrance said as he held his hand to his chest.

Their sense of reason and morality would grow numb if they stayed in this verbally harsh, undignified area for too long.

"I can't feel my body in the real world," Pi whispered as she stared at her hands.

In an AIDA server, the players lost perception of their bodies in the real world. They didn't need a screen or a controller to stay connected with their PCs; their minds were directly connected with them. It made it impossible to recognize the passage of time.

*I'm a Lost One again ....*

Although they couldn't comprehend it, this was their second time undergoing such an experience. Not only were they already accustomed to it; they were also psychologically

prepared because they were the ones infiltrating the area. But that didn't mean they had to like it.

"Aha ha-ha," was all Endrance had to say.

"Yo, Haseo!"

*"Matsu?"* Haseo exclaimed, instinctively jumping into a fighting position.

The young man staggering toward them wielding a loaded bayonet was none other than Matsu from the Seven Counsel.

"That monster nearly ate me, but I got away."

One of Matsu's legs dragged as he approached the group. His player could actually feel the pain emanating from the leg.

"A monster?"

"It's hell in there. It isn't a fight between factions anymore . . . Atoli . . . she's devouring everyone." Matsu glanced back at the main building out of the corner of his eye.

"What's going on in there? Is Atoli—"

"Why is Sakaki doing this to Moon Tree?" Matsu said breathlessly, stricken with despair.

"Sakaki? You mean *Sakaki's* doing all this?"

"I had to follow his orders. I owe him for giving a rogue PK like me a place in the Seven Counsel."

That explained why Matsu had been devoted to Sakaki to the point of being ridiculed as Sakaki's lapdog. Matsu offered him his life out of a sense of obligation. He appeared as though he had no regrets as he plummeted forward.

Ryou gasped. Matsu's back looked as if a shark had bitten him and completely torn out his texture map. Members of Moon Tree gathered around Matsu's grey corpse like a pack

of hyenas and began tearing his body, slowly dragging his remains to the main building.

All anyone could do was gape as the members of Moon Tree disposed of the corpse.

"Everyone's heart has been laid bare," said a voice.

"Who are you?" asked Ryou, wondering where the man had come from.

"He's Nala," Pi answered cautiously with regard to the lean, white-haired Lord Partizan, who stood in front of the main entrance.

*>>NALA IS NEUTRAL. HE NEVER TOOK SIDES...BUT WHO KNOWS NOW?*

Ryou read Pi's private message and felt the same. Nala had served as a moderator during the previous AIDA server incident, but there wasn't any proof that he managed to maintain control over himself this time.

"They are coming into contact with more emotions," said the Lord Partizan.

Ryou had been growing increasingly nervous as Nala walked toward them before finally yelling, "Don't move!"

Both Pi and Haseo's Avatars materialized simultaneously. Under the extreme pressure, they had subconsciously equipped Skeith and Tarvos.

Macha's User was the only one who remained calm as he watched Nala. "You don't need to act like frightened rabbits."

"Yes, please calm yourself, Haseo," said Nala when he realized how tense Haseo had become. "The AIDA will devour your heart at this rate."

*AIDA? This is the AIDA's experimental complex,* Ryou said to himself, remembering what Yata had said. The intelligent AIDA virus was using Moon Tree's headquarters as an isolated area to conduct more accurate psychological testing on the human soul.

"You look normal enough," Ryou proclaimed after concluding that he could trust Nala. Pi dropped her fists. Still, neither user dematerialized their Avatars.

"Sakaki's coup d'etat has overturned Moon Tree's ideals. When my colleagues lost the foundation for their hearts, they grew uneasy and became susceptible to being engulfed by the AIDAs darkness," said Nala.

It was reminiscent of how Kestrel's PKing during the last

AIDA server incident had terrified everyone. The coup d'etat destroyed everyone's morals. Moon Tree, which had been so proud of its iron defences, quickly fell before the AIDA.

"I see, AIDA developed an interest in Moon Tree because of the previous server incident," Pi said in a low voice.

When the previous AIDA server incident transpired, the members of Moon Tree never went into a panic because of their strong devotion to their guild. That must have drawn the AIDA's attention. The turbulence between the Sakaki faction and the Zelkova faction was enough to cause the embankment to give way.

To top it off, the guild had the Epitaph User candidate Atoli with them. Sakaki was also somewhat of an icon for Moon Tree.

“Atoli’s a monster . . . Atoli’s infatuated with Sakaki. And Sakakis the one who started the coup.”

They needed to find Atoli.
Ryou was sure about that.
“You’re right. Let’s find Sakaki, too,” Pi replied.

According to Kaede’s testimony, the AIDA server took over when Atoli PKed Zelkova. So who put that at the heart of the problem? It was clear that the concentration of AIDA would be the densest near… Sakaki.

“Sakaki *and* Atoli,” Nala said as he directed his gaze toward the main building. The stars were coming loose from their foundations and dropping from the sky, burning brightly as they fell. “They’re in the throne room.”

Nala walked through the main entrance.

“Nala, it’s dangerous here. Stay outside and we’ll go on ahead,” said Ryou.
Nala smiled bitterly. “There is no safe place. I’ll be safest if I stay by your side.”

The storm of verbal and physical violence that was ravaging Moon Tree had spread into the main building.
The uproar was sparked by the notion that only one set of beliefs was right and all others were wrong. Trying to assuage the situation was futile and agonizing, like spending twenty-four hours online, trying to see if someone's talking bad about you behind your back.

“How foolish,” Endrance said, letting his opinion slip.

Ryou and Pi kept their mouths shut. They knew better than to involve themselves in these arguments.

"They've been released from the bounds of rational thought," said Nala, who was walking ahead of everyone.

The design of Moon Tree's main building was based on a Buddhist temple and *Shinto* shrine motif. The interior was constructed like an indoor dungeon area with the rooms divided by corridors.

"The AIDA's stench is getting stronger," Pi noted as she covered her nose and mouth with her hands.

"What's it smell like?" asked Ryou.

"Blood and . . . grease."

All of a sudden, the pair noticed the silhouette of a person from down the hall stumble toward them. When the candles illuminated the figure, they realized that it was a tall Macabre Dancer in a gaudy getup.

"Oh my!" exclaimed the dancer. He walked right past them and then turned around as if just noticing someone was there. His makeup was so thick that Haseo swore he could smell it.

"Hiiragi . . murmured Haseo.

"Deary me, I see that hag Kaede got you to come," Hiiragi from the Seven Counsel spat with a snort. He hid his mouth behind his fan and burst out in an impromptu belly dance.

"Ahahaha," Endrance chuckled.

Hiiragi raised a narrow eyebrow. "How *dare* you laugh at me!"

*He was on Sakaki's side* . . . thought Ryou.

But it didn't matter who was on Sakakis side and who was on Zelkova's side now. Sakaki's coup d'etat had destroyed Moon Tree's ideals. Now that he was part of the AIDA's psychological testing, there was no way Hiiragi could've maintained his sanity. But he did manage to hold on to his queer personality pretty well considering he wasn't all there any longer.

"Dear Haseo, what's *your* definition of 'masculinity'?" asked the Macabre Dancer.

Ryou wasn't sure how to answer the question considering it had come out of the blue. *Masculinity.* Because Ryou was a man, he believed masculinity described the ideal of what he would like to be. It wasn't Haseo. Haseo was simply a copy of Ryou Misaki. For better or worse, he couldn't bring himself to face his own inadequacies. He had a different image for his ideal example of masculinity.

"Someone like . . . Ovan," Haseo replied. Ryou wanted to be like that beautiful beast who stuck to his principles. Ovan had been blessed with certain "powers" and was able to handle things all on his own.

"And you're Pi, aren't you? What's your definition of 'femininity'?" the dancer inquired.

Pi was startled by Hiiragi s question. Wracking her brain, she finally said, "My dream is to fulfil my obligations with G.U."

"So devoting yourself to your work is a feminine trait? I wonder . . . But it is quite cute of you," giggled Hiiragi. "Now then, Haseo, how do *you* define femininity?"

Ryou's image of a woman: Like the loving Virgin Mary, she would cherish Ryou Misaki despite his faults.

*Shino . . .*

Just as Ryou was about to say her name, someone placed his hand on Ryou's shoulder and snapped him back to reality.

Endrance regarded Ryou with eyes as clear as the lake at Indieglut Lugh.

"That's better."

Ryou felt as though he'd just come to after an extended daze.

He'd completely lost control over rational thought and consciousness.

Both Haseo and Pi had nearly let Hiiragi drag them down into the AIDA's vortex.

"Is Hiiragi asking the question, or is the AIDA making him?" Ryou wondered aloud.

The Epitaph Users had to refortify the walls protecting their hearts. Both Haseo's Skeith and Pi's Tarvos began to resonate as they fought to keep the evil at bay.

Hiiragi gave a fake laugh that sounded exceptionally flamboyant.

"What is masculinity to *me*? What *is femininity!"* he screamed out like a broken tape recorder.

"Which is it for you?" Endrance asked with an evil smile.

"Sakaki is my image of masculinity. But Matsu, I don't want to be like Sakaki the way you do. Kaede ... I bet a

shrewd woman like you would never understand. I'll do everything I can for the man I love, even if it is stupid. I love the feeling I get when I hang off of his every word! I'd do anything for him! I want to give everything I have and am to Sakaki—that's my display of femininity. I won't let anyone get in my way, even Zelkova. I'm here of my own free will! What was that, Nala? I'll kill everyone if you try to stop Sakaki!"

Hiiragi raved on, holding a one-man conversation.

"I don't know what goes through Sakaki's head. He won't tell me anything. I don't know what he's up to. I just blindly follow orders. That's why a woman like you could never understand how I feel. Even I can be a lady in front of Sakaki when I'm logged into *The World.* That's good enough for me.

"What's your problem, Kaede? When was it you said, 'I'll admit that you're more of a sissy than I am,' or some such garbage?

"The *nerve!* The old hag never knew how to shut up. And the hag…that brat Atoli? That brat reeks of toilet water! So what if Sakaki likes her a little. The crappy wench! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap!

"Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! CRAP! I'll never get tired of cursing that brat! She's crap! Crap! Crap! CRAP!"

Hiiragi disappeared down the hallway screaming any insults he could come up with.

"It appears that the AIDA server's influence has turned Hiiragi's love and devotion toward Sakaki into hate, just like with Matsu," Nala said.

"Then there's no use talking with him," Pi said with a sigh.

Hiiragi may as well have been an apparition.

"They're drowning in their own emotions. The poor things are lost, drifting in their hearts," Endrance said remorsefully.

"They're drifting?" Haseo repeated.

"That's right. That's how it is for everyone. It's easy for a person's heart to destroy itself when it's bound within the confines of definitions for 'masculinity' and 'femininity.' It's impossible to actually become those definitions. Even if you think you've reached that point, the meaning evolves into something else and you're back where you started."

"Isn't this a problem for you too, Endrance?"

"I've abandoned such thoughts," answered Endrance, the ever reliable 'net junkie. He found the whole male-female gender thing to be meaningless. He was Endrance and when he was Elk he'd fallen in love with Mia. For Kaoru Ichinose, the real world was just a place to eat, breathe, and go to the bathroom.

"That's why I told you to leave me be when you tried to save me back at the bottom of the lake in Indieglut Lugh. Those feelings still haven't changed. I just want to feel Mia in my chest more deeply—more strongly."

Endrance felt that the life of a Lost One was like a dream come true considering he'd been freed from having to eat, breathe, and excrement. Kaoru Ichinose was such a hardcore gamer that not even someone like Ryou, who'd rapidly progressed through the game, came close to competing.

"Let's go. I have a bad feeling about this," Haseo said as he took the lead.

*Atoli was devoted to Sakaki just like Matsu and Hiiragi*, he thought.

Nala told everyone that the throne room was up ahead.

The Epitaph Users kept their Avatars out and ready as they plunged into the deepest part of the AIDA's den.

...

## SIX

The place looked like a vault for ants. The throne room was only about the size of a gym, but it was filled with piles of PCs that had been ripped apart as if prey brought back for storage. Black bubbles that resembled boiling tar had nearly melted the bodies together. Hatred, slander, arrogance—every one of the mortal sins was reflected on their faces. People were pushing and kicking one another. It was purgatory. The red pillars and white walls had been completely infected by the AIDA. The vault had degenerated into a palace befitting demons.

While Haseo and the others stood and stared, Moon Tree's members marched on in the style of busy worker ants. Each one of them dragged a guild mate's body part into the throne room before silently going back out to hunt for more.

Pi appeared as if she was going to vomit, quickly covering her mouth with her hands. The vault reeked like tar mixed with something that had died and begun to disintegrate in heat of the summer sun.

"It’s abhorrent,” Endrance said with disgust.
Ryou scanned the area. "Nala, where is Atoli?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Don’t let your guard down,” Pi warned. “Were smack in the AIDAs belly.”

All of a sudden, they heard a voice echo.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A GIRL?

The words didn’t appear in a message window, but directly in their heads.

"Atoli?”

It was definitely Atoli’s voice, and with the voice came a hologram. The image was a person based in reality—a middle-aged woman none of them had seen before.

"I loved my mother,” said Atoli’s voice.

"I’m sure that’s Atoli’s player’s mother,” Pi said after getting a good look at the woman.

"But doing what my mother wants won’t make me happy,” continued the voice. "No matter how wonderful the things she says are, I’m still insecure.”

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MAN?

The hologram transformed into a young man PC wearing traditional Japanese-style dress.

“Sakaki,” Ryou growled, fixated on the image of Sakaki from Moon Tree.

“I can relax when I’m with Sakaki. I think you know how that feels, Haseo. That’s how you felt when you were with Shino.

And you always felt uncomfortable whenever you were with Ovan, right?"

Shino was important to Haseo the same way Sakaki was important to Atoli. Haseo's view of Ovan was the same as Atoli's view of her mother.

"I sought a fatherly figure in the same way Haseo sought a motherly figure. I fear my motherly figure and Haseo fears his fatherly figure, but we still love them."

The sound of the voice echoing from the other side of the mountain of grey corpses projected yet another image.

LOVING SOMEONE BRINGS NOTHING BUT PAIN.

"What the—?" Pi was alert, her Tarvos ready.

Countless Atolis appeared throughout the room. An illusion of her would appear only to vanish—like a mirage in the desert.

Atoli's voice carried on lamenting somewhat deliriously:

"What does anyone even know about me? What right do they have to blame everything on me if they don't even know me?"

They couldn't discern anything specific from Atoli s disjointed rant. Even though he didn't know the name *of* the girl in the picture, the screams coming from her soul carved deep into Ryou's chest.

He was suddenly overcome with rage. “Why are you doing this?” he asked angrily. He was furious at the malice he felt coming from whatever was hiding in the throne room. Why was it necessary to do something as hideous as tearing out people’s hearts in this manner?

“So we can learn about people.”

The second the voice completed its sentence, a part of the ceiling plunged to the ground. White hands belonging to the PCs that had been dumped pierced through the ceiling plastered with oozing black bubbles. The innumerable arms entwined with one another, forming one giant arm and hand. The palm of the hand served as a throne, where a lone PC sat.

“I see you made it, Haseo, friends from G.U.”

The king of corpses was Sakaki from the Seven Counsel.

Their Avatars emitted a warning sound before radiating bright light.

“The AIDA is collecting people’s memories. This is one of them,” Sakaki said, unusually calm and collected.

His eyes rimmed with eyeliner, Sakaki exuded haughty arrogance as he peered down at Haseo and the rest of the group from atop his throne of flesh. Sakaki seemed to be acting the role of the demon king—an embodiment of the evil AIDA.

“Are you saying that you went through Atoli’s PC to gather her player’s memories and build this area in *The World!”* asked Nala.



"Get back," Pi ordered Nala, who'd been trying to get in front of her while muttering his question. "You could say that we're lost within Atoli's heart. This is *The World*, where the boundary between the 'net and reality is blurred," explained Sakaki. "The same goes for the boundary between oneself and others. However, this isn't quite *The World* as you know it. .." He smiled broadly to express his enjoyment.

"This feels like it did back then, Haseo."

Haseo turned and looked Endrance in the eyes. "You mean we're in Avatar Space?"

When they fought in the Demon Palace Arena, both of their Avatars had touched. As a result, they experienced a unique phenomenon that allowed them to share each other's memories.

Haseo discovered that the cat, Mia, from Kaoru Ichinose's memories was also Endrance's Epitaph: the Sixth Phase, The Temptress, Macha. Endrance simultaneously learned about Shino Nanao.

*Does the AIDA server here at Moon Tree have attributes similar to Avatar Space?*

Ryou wondered, quickly dismissing the thought.

His case at the Demon Palace Arena was different because the Avatar Space was made and shared by two Epitaph Users. But all of the regular PCs in the area have been affected by whatever was causing this.

"Did you notice the way the members of Moon Tree foolishly killed each other? In this AIDA server, they catch a glimpse of each other's life in the real world. Then they turn away and try to protect themselves as they lash out at their

opponents," Sakaki chuckled, playing his role as demon king superbly. "This is the end result," he said, pointing toward the throne room piled with shredded corpses.

"Sakaki, where's Atoli?" Haseo snarled as he pointed his Skeith toward the man. "What did you do to her?"

"Atoli is right here," Sakaki said, staring at the various holograms of Atoli dispersed throughout the throne room.

"These are all part of Atoli's players memories."

"Correct. They're fragments of Atoli and her player, Chigusa Kusaka's, memories. They're simply a collection of information about her. Isn't that data what defines Atoli? Especially when considering we're in *The World!"*

Chigusa Kusaka was Atoli's player's name in the real world.

"How do you figure?"

"It doesn't matter what form a person takes while playing in *The World.* There's no rule saying that a player must use a PC. There are plenty of people who choose to play as beasts, are there not? The fight between the Sakaki faction and the Zelkova faction is a trivial matter before the power of my AIDA." Zelkova, Kaede, and everyone else in the game were nothing more than meager insects before him.

"You jerk!"

"Haseo," Pi interjected, "don't fall into his trap."

Endrance quietly stepped forward. Macha, a rapier with a rose-shaped knuckle guard, was poised for action. "Let's test this out," he said before launching into an attack with his Avatar. "Bolt of Love!"

Several roses instantaneously bloomed around Macha, and out of their petals shot needle-thin lasers.

"GAAAH!" Sakaki bellowed, his gaping mouth dripping black bubbles.
The myriad arms that made up the throne writhed as they struggled to form a wall to defend against Macha's attack.

"He really is an AIDA-PC." Pi was sure of it now.

The AIDA had developed an interest in the guild Moon Tree and focused its theme on the two factions supporting Sakaki and Zelkova. It also targeted Sakaki, and as soon as the AIDA infected him, his repulsion toward Zelkova grew until it took on the form of this coup d'etat.

"I think Moon Tree was supposed to be holding their monthly meeting today," Ryou said, thinking back to what Atoli had told him.

"They were waiting for a large gathering. They probably wanted as many test subjects as they could possibly obtain," Pi theorized.

"AIDA used Sakaki... but was Sakaki using the AIDA, too? Perhaps a combo of the two. At any rate, Sakaki pulled off his coup d'etat. He used Atoli's Innis Factor to create this AIDA server."

According to Yata's theories, the AIDA gained the ability to create a closed mirror server upon stealing Atoli's Morganna Factor.

If they used the Innis Factor to isolate Moon Tree's @HOME from the system . . . Atoli had been used by both Sakaki and the AIDA because she was a candidate to become an Epitaph User.

"We must eliminate the AIDA infecting Sakaki," Pi concluded.

"The three—"

A black shadow appeared behind Pi, cutting her off before she could finish her sentence.

***Cling***

*"Pi ?"* Ryou gulped. Pi had already been pierced through the stomach from behind by the time he realized what was going on.

She turned to look at the enemy standing behind her with an expression of horror on her face.

"Curse you!" howled the PC, who looked like a wandering Buddhist monk. His staff remained thrust through Pi's body. He was the Sixth Division Captain of Moon Tree, Sophora. His PC had always been quiet and never left much of an impression on others.

Pi must have lost her voice due to the severe pain, for she silently toppled forward. Without speaking, Sophora glanced down at the woman's twitching body before pulling his staff free.

***Cling.***

Bubbles formed when the rings on the top of his staff clanged against one another. The sight triggered something in Ryou's memory.

The PK that attacked him after he finished his tour for beginners held by Canard was . . .

“Moon Tree . . . has a PK?” Ryou wondered aloud.

“Bwahahaha! *You* defeat *me?* In *that* condition?” Sakaki roared with laughter atop his throne of flesh.

The members of Moon Tree swarmed around Pi like a pack of ravenous wolves. One of them tried to touch Pi, but quickly retracted his hand. She was still alive, but the moment she turned into a grey corpse, they would tear her body limb from limb. She would become yet another piece of flesh in the towers composed of human sacrifices.

‘‘You’re part of the Moon Tree’s black ops! So the rumours were true,” Nala groaned.

‘‘Black ops?”

‘‘They’re meant to purge the unwanted. They handle jobs that never should’ve existed in a guild like Moon Tree. They’re the secret—”

‘‘Sophora is my shadow,” Sakaki told them.

‘‘Your shadow?” Ryou repeated, regarding the man on the fleshy throne.

‘‘Various problems arise when you run an organization as large as Moon Tree. Someone had to do the dirty work. Zelkova and his kindheartedness never could have kept the organization together. Without me, Moon Tree would’ve fallen apart within a single day.

“I purged the members who went against Moon Tree’s beliefs and punished those who posed a threat to us. PK, e-mails, stocking, forum posts, and all other forms of harassment—there are plenty of ways to drive people away while only slightly veering from the rule book. Oh, but perhaps you’re more familiar with that sort of thing seeing as you’re a PKK.

"You see, *The World* is merely a 'net game. Killing a PC doesn't physically affect the player in real life, but crushing a PC's spirit can be surprisingly easy once you get the hang of it. Doesn't that ring some bells, Haseo?"

Moon Tree had been doing the same sort of activities as the PKs from Kestrel.

"After all that time you spent lecturing me, you ..." Ryou trailed off, suddenly feeling dizzy.

"It's a part of me I'd rather not admit I have," Sakaki said, as if he knew what Ryou was going to say. "All people have a part of themselves that they hate—that's our shadow. Sophora was most willing to become my personal shadow, and now I have my long-awaited envoy. Thanks to this foreign factor referred to as AIDA, *my* Moon Tree shall be complete!"

Sakaki stood up. He possessed the ability to control every last remnant of the corpses without any form of resistance. Anyone who defied him was killed by his shadow.

"That's what makes dealing with humans so annoying," Endrance said with a lazy grin.

Ryou turned to see how Pi was holding up. She was convulsing fiercely, the black bubbles spurting from her wound. If Sophora really was an AIDA-PC, there wasn't any guarantee that even a fully awakened Epitaph User such as Pi could survive the attack.

"I . . . tried my hardest," said a voice.

*"Huh?"* Yet another Atoli appeared, this time directly in front of Haseo.

"I gave it my all, but . . ." In her pause, the hologram of Atoli reached out to Haseo with both hands covered in white

gloves. A single Java sparrow magically appeared in the palm of one hand. Her alabaster fingers began to tremble.

*Don't do it.. .* Ryou said to himself.
"But no one ever sees me."

*Crunch.*

She clenched the bird in her first, squeezing it to death. As its feathers fluttered to the ground, everything began to fall apart. The entirety of the vault began to dissolve, including the real

Atoli and the throngs of her copies. Even Chigusa Kusaka's memories vanished. The grey corpses that filled the room were being devoured.

It was clear that something that consumed vast amounts of data was being constructed amid the torrent of bodies and blood.

The girl's naked body was being torn apart, her living flesh ripped away. She was like a chrysalis, transforming, growing, and then reemerging in a new form. It was a giant Atoli.

"She's a monster!" Nala shrieked.

Her skin felt as smooth and cold as marble. She looked like a beautiful, yet grotesque statue of a goddess with the six-spoke halo floating behind her. It was an AIDA-infected Factor.

"It's Innis!" Sakaki cried, elated. "Everyone at Moon Tree has been touched by the goddess, Atoli!"

But this goddess would never give to others. Instead, she sought things from everyone. She'd indulge herself to sate her

hunger and thirst, but would never find fulfilment. The only way to calm her raging soul was through sacrifice.

“AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!”

“Atoli, my AIDA-infected Innis!” Sakaki sang her name, awestruck.

…

## SEVEN

Atoli had been awakened. The way she released her fury was not unlike the way Ryou’s powers reflected the Shino-shaped piece missing from his heart. But unlike Ryou, Atoli carried the foreign AIDA virus. AIDA was her downfall, her hidden disease, and the source of her soul’s rampage. In her Innis form, she was both Atoli and AIDA.

She was like an unholy goddess. as he stared up at the giant Innis.

“The monster was Atoli’s AIDA-infected Avatar?”

“A monster?” Sakaki cackled. “I see—she *is* a monster. She’s the shadow that nests in the heart of man.”

The one who PKed Zelkova was ...” Haseo began

I DON’T WANT TO LOSE ANYTHING ANYMORE!

It was impossible to understand Atoli or even sympathize with her any longer. There was no way they could

communicate with her, for their voices fell on deaf ears. Chigusa Kusaka was already broken.

Actually, she'd been broken for some time. The world had pushed this girl to her breaking point without anyone realizing it, and now it was too late.

"That's why Chigusa gave up on the real world. On the 'net she could reset her memories. She found a new existence here in *The World.* She always relied on me. She entrusted her heart with me ..." Sakaki trailed off.

All of a sudden, Innis let out a piecing wail.

I DON'T WANT TO LOSE MYSELF!

"I'm special to Atoli. Of course, I couldn't ever understand this ugly duckling of a high schooler, but I never forced anything on her. I never abandoned her. I never ignored her."

SAKAKI!

"Who hurt you, Atoli?"

EVERYONE! EVERYONE HURT ME!

"That's right. And if they're out to hurt you . . ."

SAKAKI! I CAN'T HEAR ANYTHING! I CAN'T HEAR ANYTHING BUT YOUR VOICE!

". . . wouldn't it be easier to hurt them first?" Innis released another blood-curdling howl.


"I don't want to lose myself!" Innis screamed
out in a piercing voice.

“It’s the AIDA,” Endrance whispered.

The AIDA could turn a person’s mind into power. It could change reality; that’s what made them so similar to Epitaphs. The virus had infected Atoli’s player’s mind and had taken control of her.

“Is AIDA trying to figure out how to control people?”

It was similar to the way Endrance was controlled by the illusion of his cat, Mia. The AIDA used Sakaki to get to Atoli—and Moon Tree’s headquarters served as an incubator for the shadow lurking in Chigusa Kusaka.

The question was: what was the AIDA after? Or was it after anything at all? Was it merely acting as a typical virus, developing, warping data, and expanding its variants?

“Moon Tree is as good as mine! Innis will devour every ounce of everyone here! Atoli has assumed the role of a man-eating goddess. I can do it! I can end all war!” Sakaki laughed maniacally like a madman obsessed with ruling the world. “With her powers, I will create a new type of harmony between the online world and the real world. Isn’t that right, Atoli? I’m on top of the world now!”

“Curse you, Sakaki! Keep those stupid delusions locked inside that thick head of yours!” Endrance yelled.

Sakaki was also an AIDA-PC, so the coup d’etat he started with Moon Tree was very real to his player.

“Get the AIDA out of Atoli!”

If they didn’t get out of this mess soon, both Atoli and Pi could lose their lives.

"I can kill him, right?" Endrance said, licking his lips as if a cat ready to pounce.

"Take care of Sophora," ordered Ryou as he glanced back at the assassin, who was waiting impatiently for a chance to strike.

"Fine.

"Were the only ones who can do this!"

Endrance must have realized exactly how serious Ryou was taking the situation, because his smile quickly vanished.

The aura emitted from the two Epitaph Users slashed through everything near them, sending the AIDA bubbles every which way like frightened spiders.

"Skeith!" Haseo shouted. He used his Avatar to attack Innis, who was several times the size of a normal PC.

Atoli had Innis swing her arms left and right, but the monstrous goddess's hands didn't form fists. Instead, her arms transformed into sharp staves. It felt as if all of the bones in Ryou's hands cracked when Haseo came in contact with her. She managed to thwart Skeith, sending Haseo flying into a wall composed of bodies. She was far too much for him. He might as well have been engaged in fistfight with a heavy industrial machine.

*Wha—?* Ryou gulped. Atoli had nicked Skeith's blade. The steel blade usually had a dull shine to it, but now it was fogged over and covered in rust.

Sakaki burst into laughter atop his throne. "Heh ... I see you can't put your soul into it when you're up against Atoli. You couldn't shear grass with that rusty old scythe, Haseo." A normal PC couldn't see an Avatar, but Sakaki was able to see it because AIDA had infected him.

An Avatar reflected the power of its wielder's mind. The stronger its user's resolve, the more powerful the weapon became.

The stronger an emotion, whether love or hate, the more formidable the Avatar became. It was just like how Endrance loved Mia and Ryou sought Shino—and now, how Atoli was..

*She lost all sense of reason when she was infected by AIDA.*

Innis's arms were as sharp as the tip of a pike. She could only hear and obey Sakaki; that was the only way Atoli could find peace.

Atoli was supposed to use her Harvest Cleric staff to help heal people, but instead, Innis used it as a vicious weapon meant to kill.

"Finish them, Atoli," Sakaki ordered. "Turn those who torture you into mincemeat. Flush them down the toilet like the crap they are!"

Innis took flight. Her two staff-like arms were like wings of an airplane, and her torso was like the plane's body. She spun about as she soared, stirring up the vile, stagnate air. Her six-spoke halo acted as rudders, carrying her swiftly around the room.

CONFUSION FLIGHT!

Exhaust composed of black bubbles trailed behind her. The fuel that was driving her was the mind of the sixteen-year-old girl, Chigusa Kusaka. If her dual staves struck Haseo, he'd surely be turned into pulp as quickly as if he'd gotten tangled in a ship's propeller.

Epitaph Users were mentally linked with their PC. Now that Atoli's PC was infected, she had the power to turn him into a Lost

One if he got PKed. The death of Haseo in this online battle could prove life threatening for Ryou Misaki.

Innis accelerated before launching another attack. Haseo swung down Skeith, parrying the dual staves with Slash before shifting into his next attack, which pierced Innis in the back.

IT HURTS.

Atoli's whimper turned into a shriek.

IT HURTS' IT HURTS' IT HUUUUUURTS.'

The grisly goddess cried out like a maiden in distress. The sight of the girl's black tears and the sound of her tortured cries tore at Ryou's chest.

He was wracked with guilt over having used his power to hurt her.

"Why did you hurt Atoli, Haseo?" Sakaki asked from his throne.

"Curse you, Sakaki'"

"I heard . . . that you made up with Atoli. You promised that you would be kind to her from now on. And yet here you are, hurting her again. Why? It's because promises are made to be broken. They disappear into nothingness. Isn't that right, Atoli?"

SAKAKI . . .

"So don't listen to him further. Destroy this lying jerk with your *power."*

Innis screamed after Sakaki gave his orders and continued to fly, trailing black tears. Her arms were like two rock drills as she spiralled through the air, destroying anything she came in contact with. The sharp tips of her arms were searching for the source of her pain.

HAZE OF TREASON!

She spread out her rudder-like halo. Whenever she made a sudden change in course, dust particles scattered. It was as if Innis's voice were connected to speakers that amplified directly into Ryou's head. He heard every one of her incoherent complaints. She would reject him and then threaten him.

*Atoli!* Ryou screamed out in his heart. She'd become a prisoner not only to the AIDA but to Sakaki, too.

*I swear I'll save you.*

"It's over." He couldn't run away any longer, nor could he pretend that they were merely strangers. He couldn't disappear on her ever again. Haseo and Atoli had met each other. Their hearts had touched.

The wicked Innis continued her rampage.

*Don't look away,* Ryou told himself. It was the most skilled he'd ever witnessed Atoli.

"Ticking Death!" he declared, shunning all hesitation.

Skeith glistened as it struck Innis. Suddenly, the entire dimension began to warp.

The moment Haseo and Atoli touched, the ghastly throne room vanished and Ryou's world was engulfed in white light.

An image of a girl materialized in a sepia-tinted virtual frame.

Ryou recognized Atoli's player from a picture of her he'd seen once before. He couldn't help but wonder if there was a girl like her in his class. If he were to divide his class into social groups, she wouldn't be in the elite group, but she wouldn't be an outcast like Haseo, either. She was the type that would be dangling in the bottom of the middle group. Ryou was able to make sense of these things within the brief moment he saw her.

*We're in Avatar Space!* Ryou realized. When he'd fought against Endrance and their two Avatars touched, they were able to share their personal memories with each other.

*I hate you! I hate everyone! I hate you all!* Those were the words that Atoli's player, Chigusa Kusaka, screamed out in her memories. It was vitriol born from her neurosis that was now emanating from her subconscious.

Her school uniform was different from the one Ryou saw her wearing in the picture. This was probably a flashback to when she was a middle school student.

A girl, probably a friend, asked, *"Why aren't you coming to school?"*

Chigusa quietly looked down, unable to answer.

*"I can't help if you don't tell me,"* her friend said kindly. But despite the girl's concern, Chigusa remained silent. She didn't know how to put her feelings into words. Even if she managed to eek out something, it couldn't possibly convey the emotions shrouding her heart. She also figured the girl wouldn't be able to understand anyway, assuming the girl had never experienced such feelings.

It wasn't as if she'd been blatantly bullied. She'd never received a fake love letter. No one had ever hid her school shoes, and she'd never been forced to lick a toilet. If she told her teachers about it, they'd probably laugh it off, and there was no way her parents would understand.

*Persecution complex.* Her counselling came to an end with those two words. All it would take was something trivial to set it off. If you broke the class into three groups, the kids in the top group would get to do things like skip out on lunch duty or after-school cleanup duty. That sort of stuff would set it off.

The boys in the elite group were scary and the girls could make life a living nightmare until Chigusa moved to a new class in the next school year. The elites acted like arrogant nobles. They felt that it was perfectly acceptable to act in a way that would make the teachers burst out crying.

It wasn't as if she were attending one of those famous schools you see in comics filled with punks and kids from *yakuza* families.

It was a normal middle school with a harsh hierarchy. Chigusa Kusaka just so happened to be part of the lowest group. She had to clean up the elite group's messes and fill in for them during lunch and cleaning duty. They dumped

anything they didn't want to deal with on her. Chigusa and her peers were the ones maintaining the teachers' collective standard of an ideal school experience. For Chigusa, school life was an exploitation of her time and energy.

For some reason, the upper echelon of students were always the focal point of Sports Day or any other publicized club event.

The teachers seemed to believe that if things worked out well for those students, the teachers would look good, too. As a result, the students hogged all of the shining glory their small middle school had to offer.

If you took away Chigusa's "Walking Disaster" title, which she received for holding back her class on Sports Day, she wouldn't have anything left. No one was about to praise her for taking over everyone's cleaning and lunch duties. She didn't have a fairy godmother to award her a glass slipper for all of her hard work, nor did she have a prince who would acknowledge her true beauty. Chigusa's classmates didn't even remember her. The only way she could hide from all the emotional brutality was to wear her various masks.

That's the reason she loathed everyone. She didn't want to go to school so badly that she was willing to endure the cold stares and bullying, so she quit going to school for a while. Her minor rebellion didn't last long, though. Her parents and teachers thought she was playing hooky, and her classmates outright ignored the fact that she'd stopped going to school. All that remained was the mask that allowed her to play the part of a failure and a dropout. Soon, school web pages began posting nasty gossip about her. In a way, that was the end of Chigusa Kusaka's life as a middle school student.

Then she entered high school. She was sure to select a school where hardly any of her middle school classmates were going. She desperately wanted to reset her life, but she

couldn’t change the personality she was born with. By the time her first summer break as a high-school student arrived, Chigusa found that she’d become the oddball.

*Sakaki . . .*

That’s why Chigusa Kusaka was really just Atoli from Moon Tree. Who cared if people called Moon Tree a religious guild?

Someone here accepted her for who she was.

*“You did well.”* Chigusa craved to hear such praise. She didn’t care how many times she got PKed and died in the online game as long as someone would commend her. Atoli would cry out for the abolishment of PKs until she died. Even death couldn’t break her soul. If she died, she would simply get rezzed and continue her plight against PKs.

*“You must’ve tried hard.”* She yearned for Sakaki to direct those lovely words toward her.

In *The World*, Atoli was special in the eyes of Sakaki, the second in command of the enormous Moon Tree guild. She resided at the top of the hierarchy—something she never could’ve dreamed of achieving in the real world—and she went to great lengths to maintain her position. In her mind, there was no way she could find someone of the opposite gender in the dismal real world to love and adore her the way Sakaki did.

That’s what made Sakaki so perfect.

Ryou briefly glimpsed Chigusa Kusaka’s memories through

Avatar Space, and she saw his. The impact of her distorted feelings mirrored the situation with Endrance and his cat. This was what fuelled Innis's power, and the AIDA mutated those feelings.

"Don't look!'' said a female voice.

Atoli suddenly manifested herself before Haseo.

"Atoli . . ."

The Harvest Cleric held a staff bearing a six-spoke halo design.

That was the Avatar Innis's true form. Her shoulders trembled with fear and anger as she considered her own memories.

"Don't look—and don't treat me with half-hearted kindness!" she barked. "If you don't have the courage to support me, then back off! This is where I belong. This is the only place I can be myself!"

Several different masks floated around Atoli, all of them reflecting varying aspects of Chigusa Kusaka's true self.

"This isn't half-hearted," Haseo replied. "I came here on my own. I want to save you."

He walked toward Atoli until he was close enough that he could touch her if he reached out to her.

"No! My salvation is right here!" Atoli shouted angrily as she lashed out with Innis. "Dancing Haze!"

Data Drain made a direct hit on Haseo from ground zero. Caustic bubbles, along with a rapid stream of data-altering power shot out from Innis. The attack threatened to destroy Avatar Space.

Chigusa had rejected Ryou.

"Ugh!" Haseo grimaced. But he was adamant about standing his ground. Instead of averting his gaze, he glared at the Harvest Cleric who shared Shino's face. "Looking at you pisses me off!"

*It's too painful!*

Skeith and Innis were at a fierce standstill. The black bubbles spewing out of Innis attacked Haseo mercilessly, eating away at his armour and burning his skin like acid. The boy and the girl were hopelessly incensed with each other. Merely being in each other's presence was hurtful.

"You're just like me. You were always alone," said Haseo.

Judging by the brief glimpse of Chigusa's memories, he understood that she wasn't really any different than he was. His classmates mercilessly teased him about being a 'net junkie and did their best to ostracize him.

*Just like Endrance cares for Mia . . .*

Haseo loosened his grip on Skeith until he completely let go of the giant scythe and watched it fall to the ground. Atoli hadn't anticipated his forfeit. Her confusion was clearly written on her face.

"Have you lost yourself?" Haseo asked, reaching out to touch Atoli on the cheek. He felt the warm dampness where her tears had fallen.

Although she felt frozen, Atoli's heart trembled. The nuances of her every emotion flowed into Haseo through his hand.

"That monster is your heart."

Her wounded heart is what created the crazed, grotesque goddess, Innis.

"Your heart is a part of you, but there's an emptiness inside it you can't do anything about."

The AIDA had made a mirror reflection of Chigusa.

When Endrance lost the fake copy of Mia, he ended up finding the real Mia in the Macha Factor that resided in his PC. Only then was he able to completely escape from AIDA's clutches.

Based on that knowledge, Haseo needed to find out what was fictitious about Atoli. Who was the *real* her? Which persona should he attack with Skeith?

"I won't ask you to do your best," Haseo assured Atoli as he hugged her.

Smoke drifted upward from where the black bubbles had scalded Haseo. Despite the dull pain, Ryou couldn't bring himself to let go of Atoli.

She was so much like him. No one ever praised him, either. If anything, people always criticized him. He worked hard, but he wasn't ever rewarded and people almost always forgot about his achievements.

Atoli began to convulse as she spat out black bubbles. If she'd lost herself ... If the emptiness in her heart had been reflected back at her ... If Chigusa had lost sight of who she was, someone needed to shine a spotlight on her to help her find herself. The only light that could reach her heart came from the warmth of tender words.

"You're suffering because you've already tried your best."

A blinding light shone from Atoli's PC.

Ryou came back to himself with a start as colour returned to the sepia-coloured void. Innis in its giant form stood directly before him. One of its staff arms had sliced through Haseo's cheek, but Skeith had dug deep into the behemoth's stomach.

"Sakaki over there is the one who wanted you to look like this— like a monster! Atoli, you *aren't* monster! The Atoli I know is . . ."

She was the type of person who would rather get hurt than see someone else get hurt. She was a terribly clumsy young lady.

Before Haseo completed his thought, Innis began to tumble down.

Skeith's Data Drain had struck Atoli. She returned to her form as a Harvest Cleric as if the monster possessing her had been exorcised. Black toxic bubbles seeped out of her nose, ears, and every pore in her body. After all of the wretched fluid had drained from her body, something resembling a walnut came out of her.

"I see you've finished, as well," Endrance called out. Macha, with its rose-shaped knuckle guard, was stuck through Sophora.

Now cleansed of the AIDA infecting him, the wandering Buddhist monk lay unconscious.

"Atoli!" Sakaki bellowed from his throne. "Don't let them deceive you. Haseo will leave you soon enough. He'll cut off all ties with you when you're of no use to him!"

"Sakaki," Atoli trembled.

"I am the only one who will be there to support you forever. I'll never betray you, so don't betray me now. If you don't want to suffer from any more regret, hurry and eat that fruit again! When Innis inside of you merges with the AIDA, you'll be more like your true self. All you have to do is obey me. I swear you'll gain absolute power here in *The World."*

Sakaki pointed at the fruit that looked like a walnut covered in black bubbles. Atoli nodded and plucked the fruit from the black filth.

"You *don't* have to do this, Atoli. You don't have to hurt yourself for Sakaki anymore!"

"But Sakaki told me to!" Atoli cried out in a pained voice. She was seeking salvation, and due to the AIDA server's influence, she'd become extremely neurotic.

The tar-like bubbles that coated the throne room began to cluster around Atoli.

"Crap!" Haseo swung Skeith around in an attempt to keep the bubbles away from her.

The AIDA server at Moon Tree had been created by the Innis Factor in Atoll's PC. Because of that, the AIDA couldn't maintain the server unless it regained control over Atoli.

“Sakaki, I’m scared,” Atoli muttered before stuffing the walnut-like fruit into her mouth.

“Don’t be afraid. Be brave. Give it your all!”

Atoli gasped as if Sakaki’s words had given her an electric shock. She spat out the fruit and cautiously regarded Sakaki on his throne.

“But I *am* . . . giving it my all,” she said weakly. What more could he possibly want from her? Atoli held her head as she fell down to her knees.

“What?”

“I thought you knew that, Sakaki.”

Atoli’s need for trust had been intensified here. And because Sakaki had never truly understood her, he wasn’t able to understand what the problem was.

“What are you *doing*, you worthless wench?”

There was something else Sakaki hadn’t realized: because he carried the AIDA virus, he was unable to conceal his unsavoury inner feelings. With things as they stood, he couldn’t win back Atoli’s trust now that he’d lost it.

“Sakaki . . . Sakaki, I’m scared. I hate being afraid.”

“You owe me for babying you! It’s like you’re throwing sand in my eyes after all I’ve done!”

*Crash!*

Sakaki’s diatribe ceased suddenly as the throne began to quake and a glaring flash of light dissipated the rancid air. Amid the chaos emerged a giant emerald-coloured lance with an angular weight on the back end.

*“Kuhn?”*

Kuhn, who wielded the Avatar Magus, had made his late arrival. His lance pierced clear through Sakaki’s back. Sakaki

wailed, thrashing violently like a live fish impaled on a skewer, as black froth and blood splattered out of his mouth.

"New Green Light!"

Multiple green beams of light shot out, incinerating the AIDA that had infected Sakaki down to the cellular level. The throne of flesh began to crumble, and the tar-like bubbles that were holding everything together like glue disappeared, causing the countless PC arms to break loose. Legs, abdomens, and heads tumbled from the walls.

"It's so sticky," Endrance said, visibly disgusted.

Haseo froze. "Is it going to collapse?"

It didn't matter if it was an Avatar or AIDA, everything in *The World* gained its form from people's emotions.

"This AIDA server was based off of Sakaki's sick desires,

"So…"

As soon as it lost Sakaki and his story about starting a coup d'etat in Moon Tree, the AIDA server lost sight of what it was doing. The server crumbled like a castle of sand.

"Sakaki!" Atoli cried.

She continued to call out to him with all her might. The memories of the time she'd shared with Sakaki stirred her emotions.

In haste, she lashed out at Kuhn for what he did.

Sakaki couldn't pull it off," Kuhn told her calmly, completely unfazed by her verbal abuse. "Atoli, Sakaki can't get your hearing back, even if it's retrievable. Only an Epitaph User like you can do it. And the one closest to the heart of *The World* isn't Yata, either." He felt absolutely confident about what he was saying.

“First you’re late and now this?” said a voice.

“Huh ?”

Pi had just regained consciousness after having been hit by Sophora’s sneak attack. The AIDA’s influence on her had weakened, allowing the Epitaph User to fight it off and destroy it.

“Take that back, Kuhn. I’ll overlook your tardiness, but I won’t let an insult to Yata slide without—”

Pi gasped and her harsh glare evolved into a look of surprise.

She was taken aback at the sight of Kuhn looking down at them from the crumbling throne.

“Kuhn?” Her part-time worker was acting so strangely that Pi wasn’t sure how to approach him.

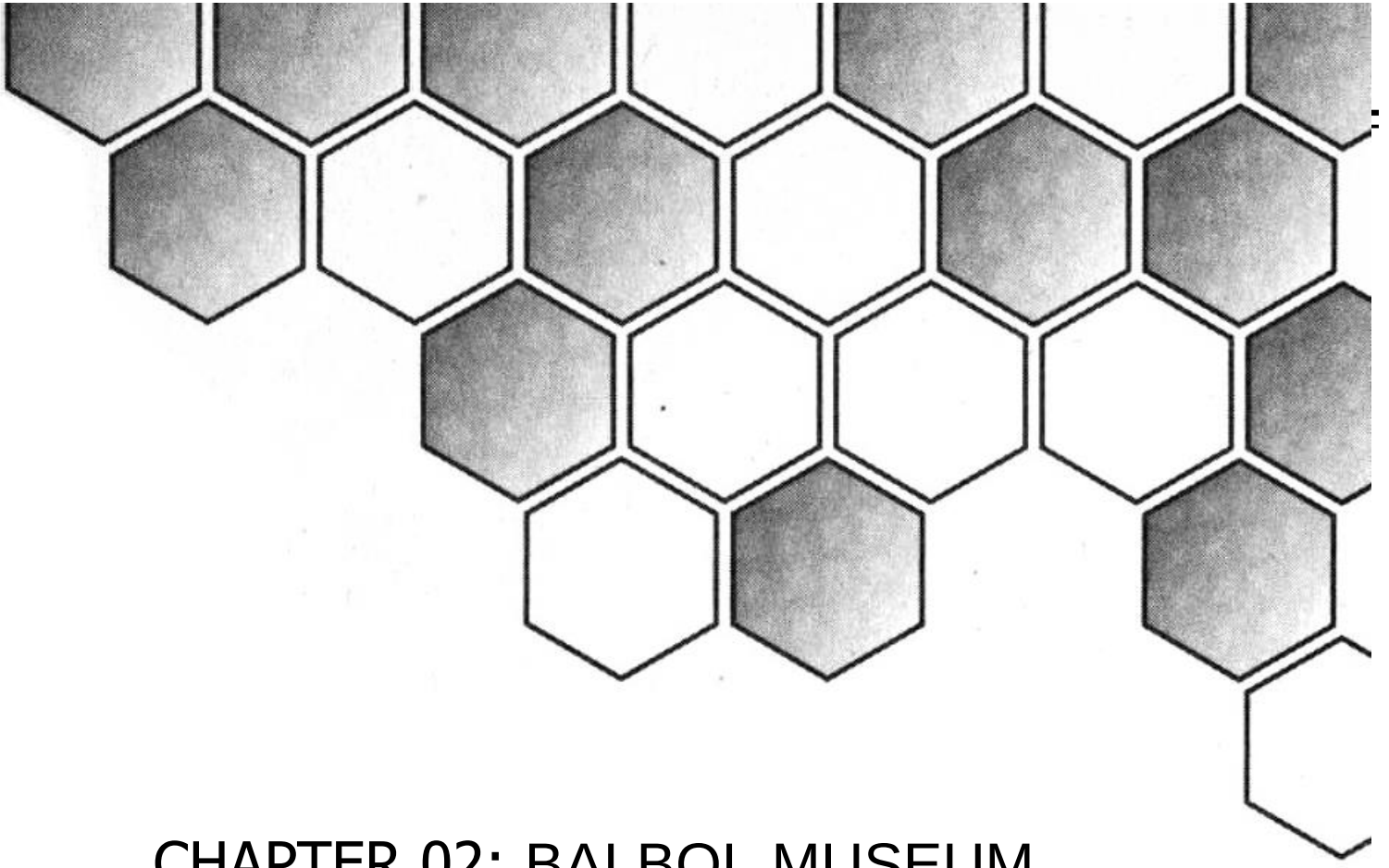
“What happened to your left eye?” Ryou inquired, noticing that one of Kuhn’s hazel eyes now shone blue like a gem.

“Sakaki’” Kuhn yelled as he kicked Sakaki off the throne right in front of Atoli, who was still calling out his name. Atoli gasped when Sakaki’s PC hit the ground with a thud. Magus had purged Sakaki of the AIDA.

“Sakaki isn’t here,” said Kuhn matter-of-factly, his gaze steely. It seemed as though he could see through anything. “He no longer fills that special place in your heart.”

The combination of Kuhn’s assertion and his heterochromic blue and hazel eyes caused time to a stop for Atoli. She ceased carrying on about Sakaki after that.

“Trust me,” Kuhn said before transporting out.



# CHAPTER 02: BALBOL MUSEUM

## ONE

Moon Tree's throne room was a place of solitude once more.

"It looks like we eliminated all of the AIDA in the area," said Pi.

She had regained consciousness and all of the Epitaph Users could feel their bodies in the real world, which proved that the AIDA threat was over, at least for now. Sakaki and his throne had toppled together, and the PC appendages plastering the walls vanished with the bubbles.

"Are you okay, Pi?" Ryou asked.

Pi heaved a long sigh. "Yeah . . . My head hurts a little, though," she admitted, grumbling over how lame she felt. She

was embarrassed and angry with herself for letting someone hit her with a surprise attack.

"Atoli . . ." Ryou called, diverting his attention.

It appeared as though Atoli's PC had been cleansed of all the infectious black bubbles. That was a relief. Ryou's eyes opened wide when he saw what the Harvest Cleric was cradling in her arms.

"Your Avatar!"

Atoli was holding Innis, a staff embellished with a six-spoke halo.

The AIDA used her Epitaph powers to create an AIDA server. When her Epitaph, the Innis Factor, was returned to Atoli, she was forcibly awoken as an Epitaph User," Pi explained. The result was the Innis they all witnessed earlier.

"Is that what the huge doll was?"

Pi pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "It was a weapon *and* a doll, she clarified. "There isn't much meaning behind the form the Avatar assumes as its vessel. Atoli lost control because of the AIDA's influence. Really it was . . ."

"... an explosion of Atoli's pent-up emotions," Endrance whispered. "It was a wave of depression that threatened to break her soul from the inside."

The AIDA server released people from the bonds of logic and heightened emotions, such as Atoli's bout with depression.

"... an emotion she had absolutely no control over," continued Pi. "That's why Atoli couldn't confine the vessel to the shape of a staff she could equip to her PC."

"So she turned into a doll?"

“She was possessed,” Endrance answered abruptly. “She was bequeathed the goddess Epitaph called The Mirage of Deceit, Innis.

The girl was threatened by the goddess and turned into a demon. I believe you’re aware of the eight illegal monsters—the Eight Phases of Morganna—from seven years ago. When I was Elk, I saw several of them. That ‘huge doll’ wasn’t exactly the same as one of the Eight Phases of Morganna, but I think it was a lot like the original.”

Atoli regained her senses just as Endrance said that a god and a demon were two sides to the same coin.

“Atoli!”

‘Huh? I . . .” Atoli looked around, her arms wrapped tightly around Innis. Her gaze wandered from Haseo, to Pi, to Endrance, and finally to Nala.

“It’s okay. We eliminated the AIDA infecting you,” Ryou said in an attempt to help put her at ease.

“I ... I hurt everyone,” Atoli whispered, absolutely petrified.

She remembered everything that had transpired while she was infected. She was so terrified that she didn’t realize she was forcing her Avatar to stay out.

Ryou understood why. Chigusa Kusaka was afraid of herself. She was unable to control the emptiness in her heart even though it was a part of her.

Sakaki—no, actually, the *AIDA* used a personal trauma to control your mind,” Endrance explained. It controlled his mind once, as well, by using his memories of Mia.

“It’s my fault. The AIDA server was made from my stolen Factor. It’s my fault everyone got hurt,” lamented Atoli. She began to tremble and held her head in her hands.

Epitaph Users were connected to their PCs in more ways than just the display and the controller. As soon as Atoli awoke, all of her actions became a reflection of her players emotions. It was like a CG actress putting on a performance.

“Atoli, don’t blame yourself,” urged Ryou.

“But . . . but what I did to Zelkova!” Atoli couldn’t help being sucked into a whirlpool of guilt and self-hatred.

“We destroyed the AIDA server. All the PCs that got PKed should recover just like they did last time.”

“That isn’t necessarily true,” Nala said apprehensively. “We don’t know what the AIDA are. And as for Zelkova, he was PKed before the AIDA server was up.”

Zelkova was directly PKed by Atoli when she was an AIDA=PC, so there was a chance he became a Lost One.

“Shut up! Don’t talk like that right now!” Ryou roared at Nala. It didn’t matter if the logic was correct or not. It wasn’t what Atoli needed to hear.

“I . . . I . . . What should I do?” Atoli held herself tight. She was pleading for their help, but she didn’t know how to put what she needed into words. She was the type of girl who couldn’t stand the pain of hurting someone else. A person like Chigusa Kusaka would destroy herself if given the power to hurt others.

"Don't dump all the blame on yourself. And stop crushing yourself with your own kindness. This isn't your fault. We're all in this mess together."

"That's right, Atoli. You aren't alone," piped an unexpected voice.

A boy wearing a simple white costume with horns attached to his head suddenly appeared.

"Zelkova?"

Atoli's eyes widened with surprise. "It's Zelkova!"

He was Moon Tree's Guild Master.

"Haseo's right, Atoli. Allow me to take all of your pain upon myself. As you can see, I'm doing just fine!" Zelkova said gently to his guild member as he held her hand.

"Zelkova, I . . . I . . . and then Sakaki . . ."

"It's fine, Atoli. You can cry if you feel like it."

When Atoli heard those words, the dam holding back her emotions finally broke. She began to sob so fiercely that she choked a bit.

"Zelkova, I see you're well," said Nala as he stepped forward.

"I am just *fine"*

"Hmm?"

"Nala—no, I suppose I should say *Yata,* leader of G.U," Zelkova corrected himself with a tender smile.

*"What?"* Ryou was shocked.

Everyone stared at the white-haired Lord Partizan.

"I had my second character infiltrate Moon Tree." As an example, he changed his voice from Nala's to Yata's. It was

obvious he was talking to them from the lotus-like pedestal in the Serpent of Lore.

“Your voice ... So you really are Yata,” Pi said, awestruck. Not even Pi, his confidant, had known about this.

I thought you seemed too well-informed,” Ryou said. He regarded Nala with the same suspicious glare he always gave Yata.

“So you’re using Yata and Nala at the exact same time?”

It was fairly common for people to create several characters under one account within *The World.* The main character was called their first character.” The sub-character was their second character; the second was often used as a mule to store items. Sometimes people would have one character be male and the other female. There were even some who used the second character to help hide their first character’s background and remain anonymous.

“It only means that I spend more time playing *The World* than most,” said Nala on behalf *of Yata.*

*Yata* worked for the system and was in control of the Serpent of Lore, so logging in with two characters at the same time was probably easy for him.

“I bet everyone would be in for a surprise if they knew someone from the system was a member of the Seven Counsel,” Zelkova giggled.

Guild Master Zelkova was even more puzzling than Nala s true identity.

*Zelkova knew about G. U. and the AIDA from the very beginning. Did he let everything happen, knowing that Nala is actually Yata?* Ryou wondered.

Yata worked for the system and represented CC Corp. Of course, there were people who'd evaded the systems surveillance, such as the hacker, Ovan. Through Shino Nanao's coma and the AIDA incidents,

Haseo had become familiar with both extremes via Yata and Ovan.

Although Zelkova was completely different from both of them, Haseo couldn't help but feel that he was comparable to them in his own way.

His potential in *The World* was certainly as great as theirs. It was similar to how Gabi from Kestrel controlled more than five thousand players—something that neither Yata or Ovan could ever accomplish.

Yata stared at Zelkova through the eyes of Nala for a moment.

He'd clearly underestimated Zelkova and was taken aback that the boy figured out Nala's true identity.

"I assume Moon Tree will get closed down, Yata," Zelkova said.

"Hmm . . ."

"CC Corp's upper management will probably want to conceal what happened here with the server abnormalities. The guild Moon Tree illegally altered data, thus breaking the End User License Agreement. As such, our @HOME will be suspended and the guild will be shut down. The investigation will point out members who led the illegal activities and their accounts will be suspended. Does that sum it up?" Zelkova described the scenario as if it was definite.

Yata didn't deny it.

"Moon Tree's . . . falling apart," Atoli said in a daze.

"Take care of Atoli. I'm going to take a quick look around the area," Zelkova said before leaving the throne room.

I'm leaving the rest to you," said Yata, meaning he was dumping cleanup duty on his subordinates. He had Nala transport out.

"Atoli—"

"Reiko," Atoli interjected, calling Pi by her real name. Chigusa had met with Reiko Saeki in the real world, just as Ryou had.

I'm sure you re upset, Miss Kusaka. I understand you want to cry. But remember that this wasn't your fault. Please don't blame yourself for all this."

"About Sakaki . . ."

"I'll see how he's doing in the real world, and I'll let you know what I find," Pi assured her now?"

"What are you going to do

"I'm going to log out," Atoli replied timidly.

"I see. Good idea. Go get some rest."

Thank you. It took Atoli all she had simply to log out.

"Think she'll be okay?" Ryou was asked. It was obvious he was concerned about her.

"She has a strong heart as long as you don't push her."

Pi surveyed the area. All of the black bubbles were gone. It appeared as though Moon Tree was back to normal.

"They've gone without a trace."

"That jerk Kuhn really went all out."

Kuhn really did deserve to be applauded. After all, he singlehandedly eliminated the AIDA infecting Sakaki and freed Moon Tree from the AIDA server. He did a phenomenal job, but Pi didn't seem too happy about it. The look in her eyes made it clear that Kuhn had another thing coming to him if he thought he'd weaseled out of a penalty for being late.

"It was kind of weird," Haseo remarked.

"What was?" asked Pi.

"I mean Kuhn. He said that he could save Atoli."

"He was just trying to act like a hero." It was a pretty old line.

"He said *he* could, not G.U. I've never seen Kuhn act so arrogantly before."

"He's always trying to show off."

"But he's never been so overly confident. And the way he looked down at us . . ." Haseo thought back to the blue eye that had peered down at them from high atop the throne.

"I'm not so sure . . . but I'll admit that he wasn't behaving like normal."

"He was like . . ." Kuhn was exactly like Haseo had been until recently.

Haseo believed that he was the only one who could save Shino—not only Shino, but the entire world. Ryou had thrived on the emptiness in his heart. The one who saved Ryou from his narrowminded path was none other than Kuhn.

"Emotional surges become exaggerated in the AIDA servers. That might be what caused it." Pi was worried about him, but that didn't stop her from conducting her investigation on Moon Tree's @HOME.

Ryou had Haseo follow Pi.

“Endrance, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll help out. I’m feeling pretty good.” He was happy because he got to spend a lot of time playing with Mia. Endrance put up Mia—Macha—and followed Haseo.

They left the throne room and started down the hallway. The light of the moon shone in through the screened windows. There weren’t any PCs around. In all likelihood, Moon Tree’s members had been forcibly logged out.

After they walked a while, they ran into Zelkova, who was looking in the opposite direction.

“Zelkova?”

“Haseo . . .”

Ryou couldn’t believe his eyes. “That’s—!”

What looked like fragments of a weapon were scattered across the wooden floor.

*Trident twin swords?*

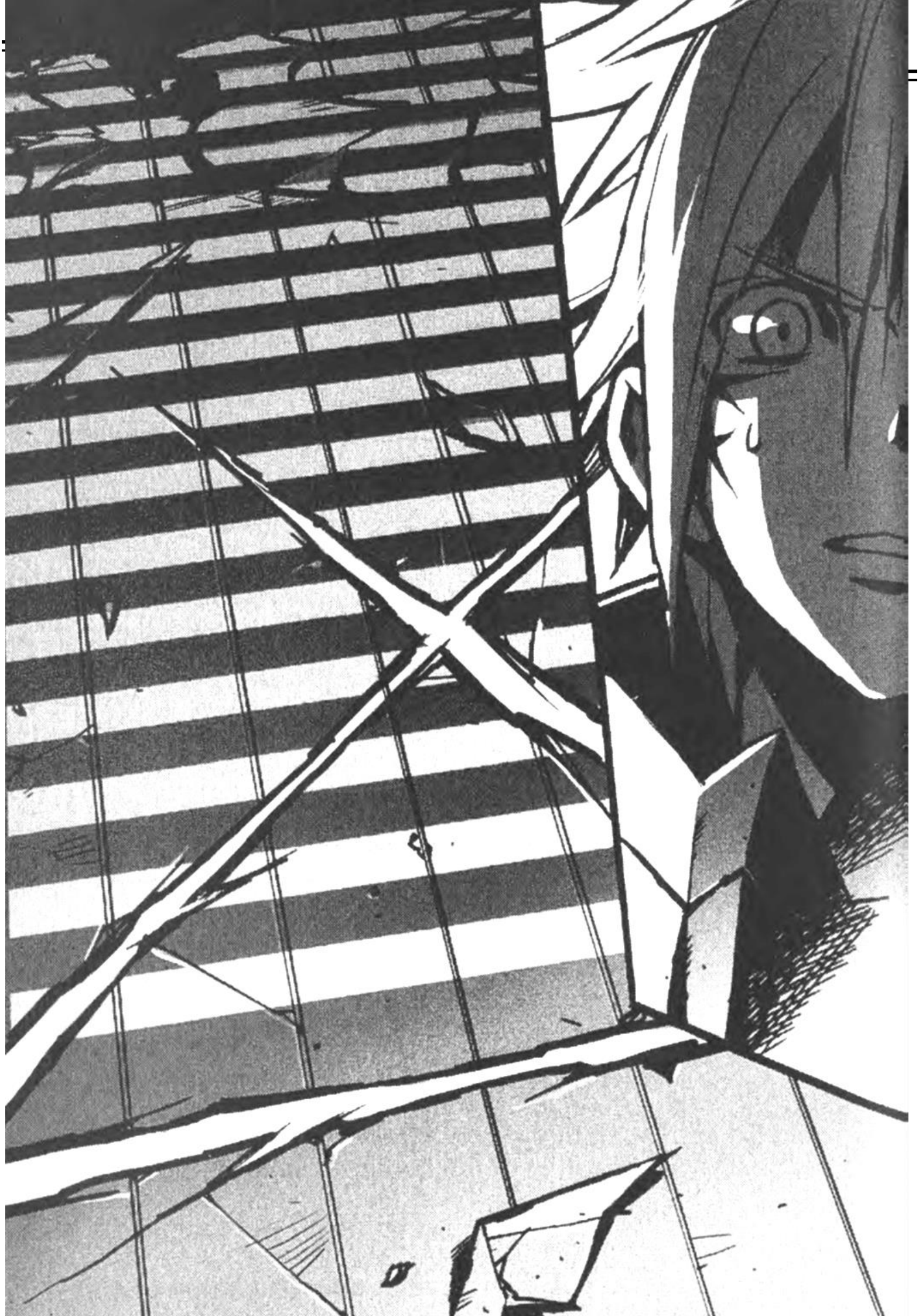
They were definitely Azure Kite’s weapons.

*Is he here, too?*

Azure Kite was an irregular PK that had reset Haseo back to Level-1. Ryou witnessed Azure Kite—Tri-Edge—PK Shino and had been chasing him ever since.

A new sign made by Tri-Edge was carved into the floor. It wasn’t there earlier. Shattered trident twin swords rested on the ground next to the sign. Ryou stood dumbfounded, unable to discern what it meant.

…



## TWO

If one were to separate a person's heart into the "conscious" and "subconscious," the core of "conscious" would be "self-awareness."

The combination of "conscious" and "subconscious" could then be described as "self."

Surrealism meant going "beyond reality." It was an art movement where the artist tried to draw the images in his subconscious mind.

The blue-haired Lord Partizan glanced up at a door and asked, "Is this a Lost Ground?"

The giant bronze door was decorated with carvings that made it look like *The Door of Death* in the Vatican. Eight grotesque demons were depicted in their own unique reliefs.

Kuhn recognized the reference because he'd read the *Banshouya Files.* They were depictions of the Eight Phases of Morganna from seven years ago.

The Steam Gunner with an abnormal left arm was waiting in front of the door to greet his guest. "Welcome to Balbol Museum," he said.

*Chime, chime.*

"You did a good job punishing Moon Tree," Ovan said, congratulating Kuhn. Ovan's boots clanked against the marble as they paced down the broad corridor.

Ovan had already mastered sign hacking—something G.U. only recently started using. He used it to transport Kuhn to Moon Tree's @HOME.

Kuhn had basically defected from G.U and had chosen Ovan to be his new partner. His acquaintance was an expert hacker who nearly became an urban legend, but here he was. Ovan's player had obtained skills comparable to Yata's, but without the support of CC Corp.

"Is this another undiscovered Lost Ground?"

The Six Ringing Peaks of Al Fadel wasn't the only unique place in *The World*. There was also this sublime museum.

"It is undiscovered."

"Oh?"

"Even if it exists, it's the same as not existing at all if no one visits it. That's especially true for a museum that has no visitors. But both of us are here." Therefore, Balbol Museum was indeed a real museum.

After they passed through the giant bronze door, they travelled down a marble colonnade before reaching an arched hallway. The styles in the museum ranged from ancient Greek and Roman to Gothic from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Neoclassicism and Romanticism were intermixed with Modern Art. Some of the styles came from the Orient and South America. It was like the were in a time capsule that had a little of something from every era and civilization imaginable.

"What's on display?" Tomonari asked his guide, Ovan.

The museum reminded him of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He visited it once with his friends as part of his tech college graduation trip. Items were placed on display here and there in a room that was far too big.

“The paintings here at Balbol Museum reflect the viewers personal take on things,” Ovan said as he continued walking.

“The viewer’s personal take?”

“The paintings resonate at the border between the conscious and subconscious mind. When you look at the pictures, you’re looking at your inner self, Kuhn.”

Tomonari was confused by the profound explanation. He stared up at a painting hung on the wall, but it wasn’t actually a painting at all. The frame held a blank picture; all it had was a nameplate.

“Hometown?” The moment he read the nameplate aloud, an image began to form on the previously blank canvas.

A giant glass dome encompassed the JR tram station. Inside was an expansive shopping mall with a built-in movie theatre. Even the bus terminal he used to commute to school was there.

“Isn’t that Kanazawa?” Ovan asked.

Tomonari nodded. “I’m amazed you recognized it. Have you visited Kanazawa before?”

“I did my homework and found out where you live.”

The museum’s structure began to change as they continued walking. In an area with an ethnic-looking interior design were two oddly shaped pedestals placed across from each other.

*Balmung?*

A statue of a winged PC from *The World, R:l* appeared on the pedestal to the right. The PC was a famous player and also

Tomonari's hero. The statue that appeared on the pedestal to the left was of his former girlfriend, Mai Minase.

"What the—?" Tomonari cut his sentence short and turned bright crimson at the sight of his old girlfriend—who'd dumped him, no less—on display.

"What did you see? I imagine the pedestal to the left was designed after a *yoni* vagina taken from a Hindu temple. It's a saucer to hold sperm, as well as a vessel to hold the sacred *linga* phallus. It's their nature to be two in one," Ovan chuckled.

That's when Tomonari realized that Ovan was unable to see the statues of Balmung and Mai. He hadn't been able to see Kanazawa in the picture either. The only reason Kuhn could see it was because he'd been there.

"This PC projects my self-awareness," Kuhn realized. "My conscious mind is portrayed by Kuhn's personality here on the 'net. My subconscious mind is portrayed by my personality in real life as Tomonari Kasumi."

"And 'you' are a combination of the two," Ovan said as he applauded. It was as if he was congratulating a newbie who just cleared a Level-1 dungeon.

In essence, if Kuhn was his conscious mind, Tomonari Kasumi's personality that served as Kuhn's core was the subconscious mind. It was the part of him that controlled Kuhn's actions without him ever realizing it. That was what this museum was all about.

"What did you see, Ovan?"

"Everyone sees something different," Ovan replied, still smiling.

"The display varies from person to person. I imagine a museum like this would be a big hit in the real world."

"Ya think?"

"Why not?"

"If you're seeing something different from everyone else, you can't share the experience with others."

"I see . . ."

"Besides, people tend to have too many things they don't want to see. I bet they'd hate it if they finally managed to forget something only to go have it thrown back in their faces." It was like flipping through a yearbook well after graduation. There were times when reminiscing could be painful.

After they passed through several display areas, they climbed down a rusty, old, iron spiral stairwell leading to the basement.

"Where are we?"

It was an archive. The dark basement housed hundreds of rows of wooden racks that seemed to stretch into infinity. The racks held all sorts of items of antiquity one would expect to find in a museum: paintings, sculptures, pottery, discoveries from excavations, manuscripts, and even movie reels. They were all clumped together in an unclassified mess.

"Balbol Museum owns a vast collection of data. This Lost Ground is my equivalent to Yata's Serpent of Lore," said Ovan as he placed his hand on a desk in front of him.

"It's a database. Are you the one in charge of this place?"

"This was here before I was. I just so happened to stumble upon it. Now I'm protecting it and tending to it because I want to," Ovan grinned. "It's pretty difficult to find anything here because everything is still disorganized."

"Even if it's here somewhere, it might as well not exist if no one can see it."

Kuhn couldn't help but wonder how someone would even begin organizing such an incredible amount of information.

"An object lacks the potential to share knowledge until someone observes it. You'd make a great librarian, Kuhn." Ovan stared into Kuhn's left eye, but Kuhn remained silent.

"By the way, exactly how well do you know Atoli?" asked Ovan.

Tomonari first met Atoli through Haseo. Unlike Pi and Yata, he wasn't granted access to players' personal information. He was merely a part-timer, after all. It wasn't as if he could do whatever he wanted the moment he became a system administrator. There were strict rules regulating access to the database for client information and G.U. research, which were only affected by rank and situational circumstances.

"She takes her work with Moon Tree very seriously. And it's clear she's absolutely devoted to Sakaki."

“Atoli’s player is Chigusa Kusaka, a first-year student in high school. She’s had an extremely problematic life in the real world.”

“I saw what happened in the throne room in Moon Tree,” Kuhn said. His left eye glistened like a sapphire.

“That’s true,” Ovan said with a smile. “Chigusa Kusaka is completely committed to Moon Tree. All she needed was something to which she could devote herself and someone to acknowledge all of her hard work. That someone was Sakaki. He tried hard to understand her.”

Ovan took down a picture that had been carelessly tossed on the uppermost part of his work desk and placed it on an easel. Tomonari was shocked. “Sakaki?”

It was a picture of Sakaki when he was violently skewered by Kuhn’s Magus. Tomonari took action in an attempt to purge Sakaki of the AIDA virus. But a quick glance at the picture made it seem as though he PKed Sakaki. He didn’t like looking at it because it depicted the reality that he’d put Sakaki’s player through terrible agony.

“Sakaki from Moon Tree . . . This man was guilty for the recent AIDA server incident in Moon Tree, so he was its focus.”

“Its focus?”

“Atoli relied on Sakaki for advice. He was acting as if he were her doctor or counsellor. But it’s easy for a psychiatrist to take on the symptoms of his patient if he over-empathizes

with her. The psychiatrist Dr. Jung calls it ‘projective identification.’ Sakaki was hardly a full-fledged doctor, so it isn’t surprising that it happened to him.” Ovan traced the edges of the picture resting on the easel with his finger.

“Sakaki . . . *empathized* with Atoli?”

“In the real world, Sakaki was an actor in an acting guild—a *failed* actor, to be honest. He was just like Atoli. No matter how hard he tried, he was a nobody in a subpar acting guild. Stardom was completely out of his reach. He cursed his lack of talent, and he cursed the director and his audience for their poor taste.

He was always searching for someone who could understand his performances.

“He was able to find that on the ’net, but not in the real world. He found a place for himself in Moon Tree. Not only did he become a Division Captain, but he rose up to the second-highest position in the guild. Sakaki from Moon Tree became famous here in *The World*.

It didn’t matter if people spoke highly of him or not, and he didn’t care if played the role of a hero or a villain. His rank was enough to fulfil his conceited heart. Atoli understood him better than anyone. She was Sakaki’s most faithful fan.”

“So Sakaki and Atoli were using the ’net to fill the holes in their real lives.”

“The holes in their lives were like puzzle pieces that snapped together perfectly. But because of Sakaki’s subconscious identification with Chigusa Kusaka, he was

dragged down by her shadow. After all, their problems were so similar. Sakaki had grown weary of his position as Number Two to the point that he desired nothing but power and praise. Atoli saw Sakaki as the perfect person, so—"

"The AIDA took advantage of that."

"Exactly. When the AIDA infected Sakaki, the shadows from his player's subconscious mind crept into his conscious mind. As soon as he succumbed to the shadow, the AIDA server incident at Moon Tree began."

If the AIDA hadn't interfered, the situation probably would've grown to nothing more than internal friction and squabbling that stayed within the guild.

"What happened to Sakaki—to his player?"

"Sakaki is right here," Ovan replied, pointing at the painting.

*"What?"* Tomonari stared at the rendering of Sakaki, whose face seemed to accuse Tomonari for all his suffering.

"He's here, yet he isn't here. This is a picture. It's nothing more than data, but everything we see here in *The World* is data. So which version of him is real and which is a fake? Is there any point in distinguishing between the two?"

"So which one is it? Ovan, you're playing with your words too much for my taste."

"Who knows? But I'm glad you're bothering to question me.

That proves that I can believe what you say to be true. Watching someone as trusting as Haseo fills me with dread.

No matter how hard you try to explain things to him, he always gets confused by every little thing he encounters. He's easily deceived, too.

He has strong desires, but lacks a good sense of judgment and understanding. Although he acts the fool, he gets angry if he thinks you've tricked him." Ovan smirked. "I'm the only one allowed to toy with Haseo."

"Quit trying to test me."

"Very well. You're a mature adult, Kuhn, and you *aren't* Haseo."

The way Ovan shrugged his shoulders indicated that he was reluctant to admit as much. "If you really did eliminate the AIDA infecting Sakaki, then his player should be back to normal. As for Moon Tree ... I doubt he'll ever find a stage like that again."

Ovan continued to explain that simply because Sakaki had returned to normal did not necessarily mean that he'd been freed from the shadow of his subconscious mind. His delivery made it sound as though he pitied the Sakaki portrayed within the framed picture. Tomonari had destroyed a person's life, regardless of whether it was done to save someone.

Ovan walked toward the wall. A metal pole that resembled a hat hanger with a birdcage hanging on it stood in the corner of the workroom. Tomonari couldn't believe his eyes. There was a small animal—a mouse or a squirrel—inside the cage. Its two bulbous eyes peered at him cautiously. Upon closer inspection, he saw that it was a prosimian.

"Sakaki's player behaved like an performer and acted out his part. But along the way, he allowed the foreign god called AIDA into his body and plotted mutiny," Ovan said as he rolled something around in the palm of his hand. It sounded as if he were rubbing two pieces of rough skin together.

He tossed one of the walnut-like fruits into the cage, which startled the prosimian so badly that it became frantic. But once it realized the fruit was food, it began sniffing it out and eventually bit into it with its front teeth.

"That wasn't Sakaki's script, however. It was Atoli's story. Sakaki merely acted as Atoli's male archetype. That said, Sakaki didn't implant the AIDA in Atoli—Atoli made him do it, subconsciously."

After the prosimian ingested the fruit, it first began to cough and then convulse. It looked strangely human as it coughed.

*What the—?*

The prosimian poked its tiny fingers through the cage's bars and deftly opened the cage door from the other side, darting past Kuhn as it escaped.

Ovan stared at the picture of Sakaki as he continued, "So then, whose story will we be trapped in once this is all said and done?"

Who would survive?

Ovan removed the picture from the easel and tossed it onto on a random shelf. No one—not even Ovan—would remember where it was.

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## THREE

### Raven @HOME Serpent of Lore

It was normal for Yata, or Takumi Hino, to log in as several different characters while playing *The World.* He'd been doing the same thing since the previous version, and had even done it seven years ago when he was known as Wiseman, a Wavemaster who specialized in information. It was a tactic he employed well before he helped support the great hero Kite.

He mastered simultaneously manipulating multiple displays and keyboards when he was still in elementary school. Now that he was a system administrator, Takumi was virtually all-knowing. He had debug commands, as well as various programs to intervene with the game. It was easy for him to gather any information he might need through his highly integrated surveillance system, the Serpent of Lore.

The AIDA was the only thing Takumi didn't fully comprehend. And the only player he couldn't completely control was the hacker, Ovan.

"Memories are projected as images when Avatars come in contact with one another," said Yata, reflecting on what he saw at Moon Tree's headquarters through his various monitors.

There had been another instance when players shared their

memories when their Avatars touched. It happened to Haseo and Endrance when they fought at the Demon Palace Arena.

"Just as the fake Mia toyed with Endrance's player, the AIDA took advantage of Atoli's trauma." All of the players who'd been at Moon Tree during this last event had gotten a quick glimpse of Atoli's—Chigusa Kusaka's—memories.

Endrance was the AIDA's lover and Atoli was the AIDA's prisoner.

"This time the AIDA server was born from Atoli's player's heart."

Her intense yearning to be accepted by others influenced not only her, but all of the other players around her, as well.

"Atoli's world influenced our minds," Yata said, deep in contemplation. Still, he only half-believed what he was saying.

All of a sudden, something small and black scurried in front of Yata's feet, running in circles across the floor. At first he thought it was a rat, but soon realized it was a prosimian, which he found strange considering there were no monsters like that programmed in the game. After all, monsters couldn't appear within the Serpent of Lore.

"What's going on?"

"That was a good train of thought you had going there."

When Yata heard the voice from behind, he stiffened to the point that he could barely move a muscle. Takumi's surprise was evident even in his monk-like Dance Macabre PC.

"Ovan?"

Ovan the hacker—the Steam Gunner with a strange left arm who always wore tinted glasses—was standing directly behind Yata.

"Hey there," Ovan said nonchalantly, as if he'd wandered into an open bar.

"How—?"

"How did I get through the Serpent of Lores security? Is that what you want to know?" Ovan asked as he paced back and forth atop the lotus-shaped platform. The prosimian leapt from the ground and onto his shoulders.

Yata found it difficult to conceal his confusion. "It's impossible.

The Serpent of Lore is the center *of CC* Corp, so there's no way a super-hacker can break in. Not even I can break in, nor could you back in the day—nor could any other skilled hacker. The AIDA hasn't been able to pull it off, either. It's absolutely safe here. But nothing is absolute."

Takumi finally realized how it could have happened.

"Good guess. You hit the nail on the head. The upper management in CC Corp has washed their hands of you." The fact was, they wanted to forge a contract with Ovan and abandon Yata.

"You're lying!"

"I wish the hero once called Wiseman wouldn't make such ludicrous accusations. That would be far too disenchanting to bear."

"You used the AIDA server incident at Moon Tree to promote yourself, didn't you?"

"Perhaps."

"But why? Why are you doing this?"

"Wait and find out."

"But you turned me down when I offered you a job! I asked you to join G.U. when CC Corp scouted me."

"I couldn't work for the company," Ovan grinned ruefully.

"Then why are you working for CC Corp now?"

"To help push the hands of the clock along."

"Are you after the eight Epitaphs?"

"I want the eight Epitaph Users to fully awaken."

"Awaken?"

"It's only one process. But yes, the biggest problem in my little plan is . . ." Ovan pointed at Yata.

"Wha—?"

"Its you, Yata. Only you," said Ovan, staring menacingly at Yata the way a bird of prey would stare at a mouse.

That's all it took for Yata—Takumi Hino—to feel as if he were utterly transparent. Ovan probably already knew everything, because he knew everything about Yata and knew all about *The World.*

Yata couldn't begin to imagine how Ovan had found out so much.

He must have gained the knowledge from a source even Yata and his Serpent of Lore couldn't reach.

"Grahhhl" Takumi screamed as if his heart were disintegrating.

"Is it because I haven't awoken my Avatar? Because I'm the last one remaining?"

"Your overly accomplished mind is—"

“Is afraid? Afraid of the unknown that we call Avatars?

Afraid of something I can’t understand? Are you implying I’ve been subconsciously rejecting it out of fear and that I’m incapable of developing further? Or are you saying that I’m a failure as an Epitaph User?” His subconscious complex was thrown on the screen via text, filling him with a sense of inferiority.

“I see you understand perfectly.”
Yata appeared dumbfounded that Ovan agreed with him.

A fully awakened Epitaph User was connected to his PC through something beyond the screen and the controller. But Yata, Takumi s PC, never moved or made motions that weren’t controlled through the information he input through his controller and keyboard. That was normal, and it was also Takumi’s limit. Yata had never left the Serpent of Lore precisely because he hadn’t been fully awakened. He lacked the sword and armour he needed to protect himself against the mysterious enemy, AIDA.

“Are you telling me that I’m inferior to you, Ovan?”

It was true. Even Haseo, Pi, Kuhn, Endrance, and Atoli were superior to him.
“Isn’t it sad?” Ovan sighed.
Now that he’d lost CC Corp as his patron, Yata had become inferior to absolutely everyone.
“Why? What do you need with the Epitaphs? What do you get from all this?” Yata yelled. As soon as he realized that Ovan was beyond his comprehension, he became as terrified of him as he was angry.

"I wish to find the truth behind *The World"* Ovan answered.

"I'm sure you already know, but I'm searching for a key." He was referring to the Key of the Twilight.

A moment later, a miraculous thing appeared in Ovan's right hand. It was the Avatar Corbenik, a bayonet, whose mouth shone a dull grey.

"My Epitaph is the Eighth Phase, The Rebirth, Corbenik."

"So . . . you've touched the truth," Takumi sneered, openly displaying his jealousy and sense of inferiority toward Ovan. "You're one of Aura's beloved Epitaph Users. The Avatar is a symbol of her blessing."

*Why? I love The World more than anyone, and I want to learn about it more than anyone,* Yata silently despaired.

Why hadn't Takumi been one of the Chosen Ones back when he was Wiseman or now as Yata? He once fought alongside the heroic Kite. Sure, he was one of many people who helped in the fight, but regardless, he was an integral player in the story. Thanks to his Serpent of Lore, he was once again at the centre of the plot, and yet . . .

"She doesn't love me."

"You've reached your limit," said Ovan. He was standing in front of Yata, his Avatar engaged. The Dance Macabre in his monk-like robe could only face Ovan in silence, like an idiot.

"You have a pure desire for knowledge," Ovan whispered into Yata's ear. "That is part of why you seek the truth."

Ovan paused momentarily.

"However, you lack the resolve to compete with me. The way you hide in the Serpent of Lore makes you no better than that recluse Endrance."

*"Why?"* Takumi yelled. A second later, he doubled over in pain. It felt as if a red-hot iron rod had seared his chest.

"Because you don't know how to be loved. You're an egghead."

Finally he got what he'd desired for so long. For the first time ever, Takumi Hino felt real pain while playing *The World.*

"I loved *The World!"* And he had—more than any other player out there. He spent more time playing the game and loving the game than anyone.

"Love brings nothing but pain."

"Ugh!"

"Now let's be honest. You fell in love with Aura."

Ovan's words filled Takumi with a strange sense of exaltation and confusion. His relationship with Aura had been a one-sided love affair spanning more than seven years.

…

## Δ ROOT TOWN: THE ETERNAL CITY OF MAC ANU

Chigusa Kusaka had regained her hearing. Everyone thought it was a direct result of her retrieving her lost Morganna Factor during the AIDA server incident at Moon Tree. If nothing else, Ryou was greatly relieved.

The two of them were talking at the bottom of the bridge in Mac Anu.

"Pi told me about Sakaki."

"What did she say?"

"She told me about how Sakaki ordered Sophora to secretly PK people . . . and about what he did in the real world," said Atoli, facing the sun as it set across the canal.

Sakaki's player was an actor in the real world, but life hadn't been going too well with his acting group. He chose to use *The World* as a way to fill the void left in the real world and sate his lust for attention. After the AIDA infected him, he was driven to start the tragic coup d'etat, which ended up making Sakaki yet another victim. It would be both illegal and immoral to ask him to take responsibility for what he did simply because he had a motive. Part of what made the intelligent AIDA virus so terrifying was how it made people act upon their motives.

"It must've been a shock to you," Ryou guessed.

Sakaki had been playing a two-faced character in the game.

His own script and play had intoxicated him with pure pleasure. He never acted like a parent to Chigusa out of sincere concern for her well-being.

Atoli shook her head. "It was an eye-opener, I guess. I'm probably just private life, but Sakaki is still Sakaki. A lot of things have happened. Well ... a lot of *bad* things have happened. I just realized he isn't perfect."

No one is truly perfect. The one person who was unparalleled to Ryou was . . .

*Ovan* . . . Ryou sighed.

Atoli's image of Sakaki, the incomparable, had been destroyed, yet Haseo's image of Ovan was still strong. He couldn't imagine that anything would change it.

"What do you mean?"

"You've got your hearing back, and with Moon Tree gone, there isn't any need to stay in *The World"*

"There isn't any need to return to the real world, either," Atoli said, smiling sadly.

"Ah."

*"The World* is still the only place where I can be myself. Haseo, you and everyone here are still so nice to me. I feel as if I'm actually needed here."

Atoli was one of eight Epitaph Users, period. She could still define her self-worth based on that fact.

"But it's dangerous . . ."

"It's better than having nowhere to go."

It was the delicate nature of her personality that had allowed her to awaken as an Epitaph User.

"So uh . . ." Ryo was at a loss, realizing he couldn't sway Atoli.

"Oh, how's Kuhn been doing?" she asked, eager to change the subject.

"Kuhn? He's been acting strange lately. He's been skipping out on our meetings. Pi's so furious that she wants to fire him."

“I wonder what’s wrong with him . . . ?” Atoli’s mind seemed to be elsewhere as she dazed off into the large canal.

“Haseo!”

“Bo?”

Sakubo—Bo this time—was running up to them.

‘‘Why hello, Bo.”

“Hi Atoli!”

The trio had experience adventuring together, so they decided to have some fun and chat for a while. Bo was extremely excited that his Canard guild shop completely sold out of goods. They promised that they’d go out adventuring again together sometime.

“I have to pick up more items to sell at the shop.”

“All right.” Ryou was just about to offer to help when he received a private chat from Pi. “ *What?* Yata’s—?” He accidentally blurted out.

“Haseo?”

Atoli and Bo were staring at Haseo with puzzled expressions.

Ryou fell silent when he realized they were watching him.

He never saw it coming. *Yata’s a Lost One?*

## Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN EXHIBITION – BALBOL MUSEUM

Ovan was sitting at his desk in the underground archives as Kuhn looked on.

"Yata's in a coma," Tomonari announced.

"Indeed. I already know," said Ovan. He seemed as if he could care less, which only exacerbated Tomonari's frustration and anger.

He'd received an emergency e-mail from Pi. Because he'd become a Lost One, it was highly likely that the AIDA infected him.

Yata, who never left the Serpent of Lore, was infected, which meant that CC Corp's mainframe, the Serpent of Lore, had allowed it to happen.

"How did you find out about Yata? Only members of G.U. are supposed to know about it."

"Because I'm Haseo's stalker." What Ovan really meant was that he eavesdropped on Haseo's private chat.

"Ovan, did you have a hand in this?" Tomonari wondered exactly what this man knew about AIDA. He also knew he had to be careful.

"Come," Ovan instructed Kuhn as he picked some sheepskin parchment paper that had been left upside down on his desk.

As they walked through the overly spacious Balbol Museum, Kuhn couldn't imagine how long it would take to view all of the pieces on display. More than one human lifetime, surely.

Eight pedestals were neatly lined up to form an octagon in a round room. It was unclear what was supposed to be on display and what the statues would be.

"There are eight pedestals," Kuhn noted.

"I call this the Chamber of Epitaphs," said Ovan.

Kuhn heard something echo behind him. He turned to see what was making the sound and saw a monstrous form appear atop one of the pedestals. It was hard to describe. At first glance, the figure resembled plankton, with leaves growing out of the stem symmetrically on both sides.

Tomonari knew exactly what it was. “Magus!”

It was one of the Eight Phases of Morganna carved on the museum’s bronze door. The irregular monster, the Third Phase, Magus was Kites enemy in the incident with the Lost Ones seven years before.

“The Epitaph User archetypes are projected here.”
“Is this what the Avatar originally looked like?”
“It doesn’t matter what it originally looked like. The statues here are the primary images of the Eight Phases—the eight Morganna Factors. A Morganna Factor takes on the form of a weapon, or Avatar, when an Epitaph-PC’s player controls it. During the incident at Moon Tree the other day, Atoli’s Avatar was freed from her player’s control because of the AIDA. That was the reason her PC transformed into a possessed monster.”

Both the Avatar and the monster were legitimate forms of the Epitaph.

“Ovan, what are you after?” Tomonari asked accusingly. “I can’t trust you until I know for sure that you had nothing to do with Yata’s coma.”
“I’m trying to awaken the eight Epitaph Users,” Ovan answered.

"I believe the path to the ultimate AI, Aura, will open when all eight Epitaphs are activated at the same time."

"The ultimate AI?"

"People must carry a weight of responsibility proportional to the importance of what they're trying to accomplish. Yata failed to do so and was adequately punished. The same goes for Sakaki.

Kuhn, the more pure and noble your goals are, the more you'll feel as though you're crawling through filth. You can't be the only one left untainted."

Tomonari was speechless to hear that Ovan was suggesting that Tomonari lacked resolve.

"The festival will be most exciting."

"What festival?"

"We will hold a festival at the border between the normal and the abnormal to purify both time and space. The celebration of her rebirth is nigh."

"Aura's rebirth ..."

"Kuhn, we no longer have Yata to get in our way. I'm sure this will come as a surprise to you, but dreams *do* come true if you wish long and hard enough," Ovan said as he placed the rolled piece of parchment atop one of the pedestals.

AAAAAAHHHHHH!

As the parchment paper floated upward, a terrible scream came from it.

Tomonari couldn't believe his eyes. "Yata?"

A picture of Yata appeared on the paper. But it wasn't merely a drawing; it was Yata himself. Yata's scream assumed the form of jumbled text from within the picture.

The image that appeared on the pedestal where Ovan had placed the paper was none other than . . .

"It's the Fourth Phase, The Prophet, Fidchell," said Ovan. It was a strange monolith, formed from various shaped stones. The irregular monster from seven years ago was the Fourth Phase's archetype.

Tomonari fell into a panic. "Is Yata ... is the *real* Yata locked up in that picture?"

"It doesn't matter if he's a PC or a picture on parchment. This is *The World* and it isn't *The World"* Ovan explained. He seemed to enjoy watching Yata wail.

"Yata! C'mon, man. Do something, Ovan!"

"I can't do anything."

"Crap!" Kuhn materialized Magus, but he found himself hesitating. He was dumbfounded that Yata could be sealed away within such a thin sheet of paper.

"I wouldn't dare. Even I don't know what would happen," Ovan said in an attempt to stop Kuhn.

"What?"

"Haseo saved Endrance once on an AIDA server. Endrance was on the brink of getting devoured by *The World's* background character Cernunnos, the God of Death. He was able to do it because of Kaoru Ichinose's lingering attachment to Mia, but if you take a good look at Yata—"

Yata wasn't suffering or upset. Quite the contrary, he was laughing. The picture showed him in such bliss that he was howling.

"You see? Yata *wants* to be sealed within that picture. He's lost all the meaningless things that have amassed around him, including his rank and pride. Dear little Yata has finally awoken as an Epitaph User. He's grown ever closer to the core of *The World*, just as he always desired. By turning into a picture, he's become part of *The World* and has unified with Aura, whom he's loved for seven years. We should congratulate him!" It sounded as if Ovan was toasting a newly married couple.

''In the real world Yata is . . . He's in a coma!"

''Yata's mind is no longer with his body, so I believe that's an accurate enough description of his current condition. Takumi Hino has become part of *The World's* story. I intend to take advantage of that.

''I have a question for you," Ovan said respectfully as he regarded the image of Yata. "Where is the Fifth Phase, The Machinator, Gorre? Tell me what your subconscious already knows. Who is the last Epitaph User?"

Yata's mouth snapped open and shut as if he were talking.

Tomonari strained his ears to listen, but couldn't pick up anything.

Only Ovan, who asked the question, could hear the answer. "Fascinating." Ovan appeared most pleased by what Yata had to say. "I see the Epitaph Users are drawn together." He began

humming happily, delighted that he was able to connect the dots.

"What's happened to Yata?" Tomonari asked. He was feeling incapable of keeping up with what was going on. Ovan had him utterly confused.

"He's an automatic fortune-telling machine. Just like you have heightened eyesight, our friend and his egghead over here have the sixth sense. His Epitaph's name, The Prophet, is perfectly suited for him."

"Spill it!" Kuhn growled.

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me what you're after. I won't lend you my 'power' if you don't. The eight Epitaphs and the rebirth of the ultimate AI, Aura, are only a means, not an end. I remember what you told Haseo!"

It wasn't about gaining true power, but what one did once he obtained it.

"So you want to know the end to the means?"

"Yes."

"What if I said it was to save the Lost Ones?"

"You're going to save Shino?" Shino used to be one of Haseo's friends in his old guild, which also made her one of Ovan's friends, because he was the Twilight Brigade's Guild Master.

"I never lie," Ovan declared. He had the same goal as Haseo.

"What—you want me to trust you?"

"It doesn't matter if you do or don't, Kuhn. You're already stuck with me. There's no way for you to defy *my* story."

It didn't take long before Tomonari learned exactly what Ovan meant.

…

### Raven @HOME

All the members of G.U. had been summoned to Raven's @HOME.

"What happened to Yata?" Ryou asked Pi.

In addition to Haseo, Endrance and Pi were also present. Kuhn wasn't there yet. Of course, it wouldn't be the first time Kuhn pulled a no-show.

Pi was unwilling to disclose any of Yata's personal information, but in a concerned tone said, "In the real world, he's comatose in a hospital."

"Did the AIDA do it?"

"I can't think of any other explanation," Pi replied, uncertain herself.

*Everyone around me is becoming a Lost One,* Ryou thought. He was furious about what was going *on. Just attack me! Why won't the AIDA just go after me instead of everyone else?* If the virus really was intelligent, he wanted to witness it firsthand. He wanted to force it to explain itself.

"Isn't there a log? Yata never left the Serpent of Lore, right? So something must have happened here." Ryou wanted to be sure Pi had already checked this possibility.

"Well . . . our access privileges have been frozen," said Pi, at a loss. They couldn't view the log without getting permission from the upper management first.

"This is ridiculous."

"What should we do?"

Endrance was annoyed with the situation and Atoli was nervously staring down at her feet.

"What does the upper management think they're doing with Project G.U.?"

"There's no need to worry, Ms. Saeki," someone said as he transported into the room. It was a black PC that resembled a chess piece.

"Whore you?"

"He's part of the upper management," Pi said with a rigid expression before the chess piece could answer. "He's a PC reserved for VIPs."

"We're negating our contract with Yata because it has been determined he's no longer fit to work. Allow me to introduce the new leader of Project G.U. to you."

Upon receiving permission to enter, a PC began walking down the hallway that led to the Serpent of Lore's entrance.

Ryou shrieked in surprise when he saw who it was.

Pi's eyes grew wide.

Standing before them was their part-time worker, Kuhn.

"G.U. has fallen from Yata's hands to mine. I hope that you will obey my instructions henceforth," Kuhn said in a very businesslike manner. His blue eye glimmered.

# FOUR

*This is a museum.*
*If one could find order in the chaotic displays,*
*Then surely, he could gain insight on the past, present, and future.*

## Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN EXHIBITION, BALBOL MUSEUM

Kuhn accompanied Ryou and the rest of the group to an undiscovered Lost Ground.

"Balbol Museum . . ." It was a large museum area. This was naturally Haseo's first time seeing it. The Twilight Brigade, his former guild led by Ovan, unearthed countless Lost Grounds, but this wasn't one of them.

"It's so mysterious," Atoli sighed as she stared in wonder. "Did you find it, Kuhn?"

"No, I didn't."

"Then who did?"

Ryou glanced over at the walls. There was an empty frame with a title plate next to it that read: HOMETOWN.

Suddenly, an image of the area surrounding Ryou's house appeared within the frame. It had the shopping arcade in front of the train station, the park, his favourite bookstore—even his cram school.

"What's my hometown doing in a picture here?" That his hometown would be featured in a painting in one of *The World's* Lost Grounds confounded him.

*"Your* hometown? But I see my hometown in the painting," said Pi as she stared at the picture of the old fishing village where she lived until high school. Atoli saw the area where she'd grown up as well.

"How 'bout you, Endrance?"

"It's Mac Anu." It was the old R:1 version of the Root Town, filled with back alleyways.

"Balbol Museum is different for all of its visitors," said Kuhn. "Everyone envisions a unique place upon hearing "hometown."

There are some who think of where they were born, while others think of where they were raised. Some people even think of their hometown as their old home, or where their parents and grandparents used to live. Endrance's image of "hometown" was a town in a good old online game.

"Kuhn, did you see Kanazawa?"

"Sure did," Kuhn nodded as he continued down the large marble hallway.

*So this Lost Ground reflects the players' memories . . .*

The next room they entered was decorated in a colourful Indian motif. A pair of pedestals faced each other.

Atoli studied the oddly shaped pedestals from top to bottom.

"What are they?"

"Male and female," Endrance said as he traced his fingers along the *linga* phallus. The other pedestal was of a *yoni* vagina. At first, Atoli had a blank look on her face, but then she turned bright red when she figured out what he meant.

"Male and female, eh? My hometown has a traditional festival where we worship the symbol of manliness," Pi said as she approached the *linga* phallus.

Ryou moved Haseo toward the phallus statue, but as he did, the pedestal representing masculinity turned into a different statue. *Ovan* . . . The statue representing femininity turned into Shino.

"Pi, what do you see?"

"My big brother. I see it can show people from the real world, as well as the game world." Pi was slightly embarrassed that it made her look as if she had a thing for her brother. However, no one else there could see the statue of Reiko's brother.

"How about you, Endrance?"

"Both of them are Mia," Endrance said without hesitation.

Atoli stared intently at the statue representing masculinity.

Ryou decided it would be best not to ask her what she saw.

Masculinity and femininity . . . after what just happened in Moon Tree's headquarters, those were topics too taboo to discuss around her.

The group continued to take in Balbol Museum as they passed through several more fascinating displays.

"What are we doing here?" Pi asked Kuhn.

Kuhn didn't offer a response.

"Care to give an explanation? You *are* a CC Corp administrator now, not to mention my boss."

"I don't consider myself your superior. But I need you to trust me for now."

"Elites always like to act secretive," Pi said with as much sarcasm as she could muster.

“I trust Kuhn,” chirped Atoli.
Ryou opted to stay out of the whole mess.

They walked through a grassy courtyard and came to a small building hidden within a grove of trees that looked like a church one might expect to find in an Eastern European countryside. It lacked a cross or any other symbol that might indicate a particular religion, but everyone knew it had to be a house of some god or other.

As the five Epitaph Users entered the building, a beam of light shone through the ceiling window, illuminating the dust as it danced on the air. There was no altar or chairs for the worshippers to sit in. The building was in ruins. The mosaic that was supposed to decorate the dirt wall had crumbled to pieces, making it impossible to identify the story it once told. In the centre of the building sat a large glass case.

“Isn’t that—?” Ryou gulped.

Encased in the glass container was a large broken staff, the top of which was embellished with a cross overlaying a circle.

“What is that, Kuhn?”
“Beats me. That glass coffin wasn’t here the last time I walked through.”
“Huh?”
“It’s possible that it appeared since you arrived, Haseo. The museum always changes,” said Kuhn before leaving the building through its alternate entrance.

Ryou wanted to learn more about the staff with a cross on it, but his tour guide was hurrying him along.

They passed through a breezeway and came to yet another building filled with displays. Numerous Roman pillars supported the long hallway. The right side of the hallway was covered with windows, and the left side was decorated with several paintings.

"It's a Lost Ground."

The first picture was of a floating island with a church on it. It was in the navel of a lake. It had to be Hulle Granz Cathedral.

"I guess this is the Room of Lost History," said Kuhn.

There were also paintings of Arche Koeln Waterfall, Morrigu Barrow Wall, and Indieglut Lugh. Two of them depicted the Wailing Capitol Wald Uberlisterin and Hy Brasail, the Isle of Kings. It was a showcase for all of the Lost Grounds. Among the artwork were places Ryou had never seen before, one of which was a stormy mountain covered in snow. Another was a mansion with chipped golden paint.

Kuhn stood and stared at the painting of an indigo blue sky ravaged by layers of dark storm clouds directly in front of him. There were eerie, bright patches where the sky shone through the holes in the clouds. The way the amber-coloured horizon glowed in the distance must have been some kind of optical illusion. Against the horizon was a silhouette of mountain tops. Not even a single blade of grass grew in the swampland below. Amid it all was a large stone monument.

"Stonehenge?" Atoli whispered.

In the uppermost part of the picture, up in the sky, was the tip of something giant.

Ryou recognized it. "It's Coite-Bodher Battlefield."

*“Why do you think that island is a dragon?”*

*Because that island in the sky is the petrified form of the Battle Dragon Mag Mell. This is a Lost Ground. I found this area together with Ovan hack in our Twilight Brigade days.*

*“The reason you thought that it was the petrified form of the Battle Dragon Mag Mell is because you just heard the story about the battle here at Coite- Bodher.”*

‘‘Let’s go. This isn’t what I wanted to show you.”

‘‘Where are you taking us now, Kuhn?” Ryou asked as he stared into Kuhn’s blue left eye. Kuhn said nothing as he pushed the group forward.

The group arrived at a perfectly round display room with eight pedestals arranged to form an octagon.

‘‘Where are we now?”

‘‘This is the Chamber of Epitaphs,” Kuhn replied. He stood in the doorway and instructed everyone to gather around the pedestals. Ryou silently obeyed, forcing Haseo to move along. The only identifying features about the pedestals were the nameplates carved into them.

“S-K-E-I-T-H,” Ryou spelled out.

A moment later, an image of a human-like figure projected onto the pedestal. It was a white doll holding a staff with a cross on the top. The projection hovered over the pedestal as if it were a ghost.

*I am right here.*

"What the—?" Ryou practically jumped out of his skin. It sounded as if someone had whispered in his ear. Haseo simply stood there in shock.

The staff with a decorative cross on it was exactly the same as the one he saw in the glass case. The sight of it triggered a flashback of Skeith. He figured it was the irregular monster from the Morganna Incident seven years ago that he'd read about in the *Banshouya Files.*

*But why do I feel like I've seen it before?* He sensed that at some point, he'd seen it up close, not just in the pictures of the *Banshouya Files.*

It felt as if he'd been closer to it than anyone else. The feeling of deja-vu was overwhelming.

The Second Phase, Innis, appeared before Atoli, and the Sixth Phase, Macha, appeared before Endrance. Pi approached the pedestal for the Seventh Phase, Tarvos, but when she stood in front of it, the image of a monster—one of the Eight Phases of Morganna—suddenly appeared.

"Balbol Museum is a showcase for various archetypes," Kuhn explained.

"Archetypes?"



"It's a word coined by the psychiatrist Dr. Jung," Pi whispered.

"Harald Hoerwick created *The World*. Part of *The World* was supposed to be the foetus for the ultimate AI. The Morganna System and the Black Box are just two of the ways we refer to it."

Kuhn stood in front of the pedestal for the Third Phase. An image of the irregular monster Magus from seven years ago levitated above the pedestal.

"Morganna is the ultimate womb and the ancient Goddess of Land. The Eight Phases of Morganna that are projected when were here represent the eight archetypes to the Great Mother's persona."

Kuhn pointed to one of the pedestals. It was the Fifth Phase, Gorre. They still didn't know who its Epitaph User was, so naturally the pedestal stood empty.

"The Fifth Phase . . ."

"Until we solve the riddle surrounding Gorre, we'll be unable to gather all eight Epitaph Users. Basically, it's impossible to revive Aura until we find the answer. That means we can't exterminate the AIDA yet, either."

"So who is it? Who's the Epitaph User for the Fifth Phase?"

"It just so happens that he's already logged in." Kuhn redirected his gaze toward the door, where a Shadow Warlock wearing a crescent-shaped hat was peeking in.

“Bo!”

“Oh, Haseo! Atoli! Everyone! You’re all here!” Sakuho—Bo— sang as he skipped happily into the room.

“Over here, Bo. There’s something neat I’d like you to see,” Kuhn said as he guided the boy over to the Fifth Phase’s pedestal.

“Wait, Kuhn, don’t—!” Ryou tried to stop him, but a howling sound that sounded like the roar of a broken speaker interrupted him.

YOU SAW ME!

A stone monster shaped like a pair of twins materialized. Ryou only got a quick glance at Gorre before his vision completely blacked out. He could feel himself falling into nothingness.

…

## FIVE

Owain was the god of the night and the moon. It was his job to carry the moon at all times of the day. He was very particular, so each day he adjusted the light of the moon and took regular breaks.

Whenever he went on break, there would consequently be a new moon. There were also times when he would become terribly thirsty and abandon the moon in the middle of the night so he could go sneak a drink. Whenever he took that liberty, there was a lunar eclipse.

…

## Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN SIN REALM, WORLD OF SIN RAN HATI

The sound of owls, wolves, and creatures beyond the imagination stirred in the darkness. The air was shrouded in mist, making it almost impossible to see.

"Not again," Haseo grumbled as he sat up in a pile of leaves that had cushioned his fall. Actually, it was Ryou. He'd fallen into yet another one of *The World's* parallel realms and had lost all sense of his real body.

He was deep within a forest, but not just any forest; it was a primeval one without any real paths and still uninhabited by man. This would be impossible in a real game. Who would bother playing a game where the maps didn't tell the players where to go?

"Haseo?" said the voice of a person stomping along the grass.

"Endrance!"

"You're here too?"

"Yeah. You too, huh?"

Those qualified to become Epitaph Users seemed to have an innate ability to accept the random workings of *The World.*

*We must have a strong affinity with the game,* Ryou said to himself'

He couldn't help but laugh at his special ability. Once again he'd become a Lost One. The AIDA server incident at

Moon Tree had only recently happened. Plus, this was his third time undergoing the experience, so he was used to it.

Ryou called out for Kuhn. After all, Kuhn was the one who got them into this mess. But he never responded.

"Of all the stupid, careless . . ."
"It looks like we're the only ones here." There wasn't a trace of Pi or Atoli.
"Yeah . . . looks like . . ."

They needed to assess the situation. When Sakubo stood in front a pedestal in the Chamber of Epitaphs, twin monsters appeared out of the stone. They were the Fifth Phase of Morganna, Gorre.

"Does that mean Sakubo is The Machinator's Epitaph User?"
"So it would seem." It also implied that Kuhn had already known as much.

There was something strange about Saku that was nagging at Ryou. It went back to when Kaoru's mind had been trapped in the bottom of the lake at Indieglut Lugh during the first AIDA server incident. He remembered seeing a brief image of Saku when he saved Endrance.

…

He'd sunk to the bottom of the lake. A Shadow Warlock in a crescent-shaped hat was peering down at him from the

surface of the water. It was Sakubo, kneeling and looking down into the river.

"Heh-heh. You want to stay here, I'm sure."

It was like being in a dream or a surreal Aesop's fable where everything was wrong.

"Your cat isn't here . . . I'm sorry."

She looked mesmerized.

The fake Osaka accent was a dead giveaway that this was the sister, Saku. Sakubo was a character used by twins. Saku was the sister, and Bo was the brother.

"But you have to stay here, right?" her voice echoed.

*Who was she talking to?*

…

"Endrance, was the one who locked you up in Indieglut Lugh's lake—?" Ryou began in an attempt to voice his concerns.

"I was thinking the same thing," Endrance answered. They thought that perhaps Sakubo had locked him there. But . . .

"Sakubo has two players. Saku and Bo are brother and sister twins who share the same PC. Which one do you think is the Epitaph User—Saku?" Ryou saw Saku with her fake Osaka accent in his vision. Perhaps she used some sort of Epitaph power to trap Endrance there.

“Who knows? We don’t even know for sure that the image we saw was real. And do you truly believe that they’re sharing that PC?”

Endrance was absolutely right. The only thing they knew for certain was that Sakubo was an Epitaph-PC that held a Morganna Factor in it.

“Hey! Wha—?” Something black—about eight inches tall—flew past Ryou and circled Endrance before landing on his shoulder.

“Is that a bat?”

“It’s been following me for a while now,” said Endrance. It didn’t seem to bother him in the slightest. He even let it stay on his shoulder as he began walking away.

“Where are you going?”

“Against the wind. It has a moist feel to it.” Endrance’s skin had a heightened ability to feel things, and Kaoru’s sense of feeling had also been greatly enhanced.

They wandered through the forest, barely able to see where they were going.

“Endrance, back to what we were talking about earlier. There’s one other thing I’m sure about.”

“Oh?”

“Bo’s player is real. He truly wants to help new players through Canard. He wasn’t role-playing that.”

“You’re naive.”

After they walked a while longer, they approached a mountain stream trickling through a clearing in the forest.

*It's a river.*

"This is where the wind was coming from," Endrance noted as he began to walk upstream.

"Think there's something up there?"

"It's better than blindly tramping through the forest."

In the end, Endrance's guess was right. It was hard to tell time in the game world, but after walking for what felt like ages, they stumbled upon a clearing with a lake. Clear water rippled around the white lakefront, and not a cloud marred the starry night sky. The full moon looked like a giant, round mirror.

*The World* had a myth about the starry constellations.

*Long, long ago there used to be a very haughty girl named Iseult,* a voice said.

Ryou wasn't sure if it was the voice of the lake, the forest, or the stars.

*Iseult was both pretty and had a beautiful voice. All of the men in town fell in love with her, but she made impossible demands of her suitors before she would even consider marrying them.*

*A poor tailor boy named Tristan asked for her hand in marriage. She told him,*

*"I will marry you if you bring me a dress made from the night sky's shroud." Tristan thought that Owain, the god of the moon, might be able to help him, so he set out to Ran Hati's forest. He searched for three months and still wasn't*

*able to find Owain's secret hut. In the fourth month, he finally found the hut on the edge of a lake.*

*The serious Moon God listened to Tristan's desperate pleas and gave the permission, saying, "You may cut a small piece of the sky by the foot of a mountain." He then bequeathed magical scissors, thread, and a needle to Tristan.*

*"The night sky's shroud reveals all truths. Should a person with ugliness in her heart don the shroud, she will be transformed to match her heart. She will spend all eternity unable to revert back to her former glory," the god warned. Tristan was intoxicated by Iseult's beauty and did not stop to ponder the god's warning. He rushed to the highest peak in the Six Ringing Peaks of Al Tadel, where he attached a ladder to the peak. With his magic scissors he cut off a piece of the night shroud.*

*He used his great skills along with his magical needle and thread to create a beautiful dress unlike any other and offered it to Iseult. However, the second Iseult slipped her arms in the sleeves, the pretty girl transformed into a bat. Her beautiful voice was replaced with a dreadful screeching sound. No matter how beautiful Iseult was, she was still human. The moment she put on the dress made from the night shroud, she was unable to hide the ugliness within her heart.*

*Tristan grieved his fate. He returned to Owain's secret hut, taking the bat with him, and asked Owain to return Iseult to her original form. The god promised that he would comply with Tristan's request as soon as the boy repaired all of the holes in the night sky.*

*Ever since then, Tristan has spent every night dashing across the sky, trying to fix the holes with his magical thread and needle. But the shroud is constantly being ripped and torn by falling stars. Thus he must spend all eternity together with his bat running across the night sky.*

The voice fell silent after the story came to an end. Perhaps it had been the voice of the moon. Its likely that the myth was only a small part of the background story for *The World.* That would make this the forest in the Lost Ground, Ran Hati.

"Hmm . . ." Endrance twisted his mouth as he glanced over at the bat on his shoulder.

"Is this the bat from the story?"

*Was this what had become of Tristans beloved Iseult?*

"But I'm not a tailor, so let's move on. According to that story, the Moon God's secret hut should be on the lakeside."

They walked along the shore, and before too long they could see light coming from windows of a log house hidden by giant beech trees.

"It's Owain's secret hut!"

"Let's go in," Endrance said as he confidently opened the door.

The log house was uninhabited. The only things inside were a chair, a table, a pitcher, and a cup. A candle that would never burn out illuminated the room from its candle jack.

"No one's here. Now what do we do?" Endrance sighed and slumped down in the chair.

"We should try to figure out how to get out, considering we're stuck in *The World* right now."

"I don't mind staying like this."

"But I do," Ryou said grimly.

He needed to think of something. Atoli's Epitaph had been used to create the server when Moon Tree's headquarters were transformed into an AIDA server. *This time Sakubo's doing it.*

…

Was Sakuho's player really behind this? He did trap Endrance in the bottom of the lake in Indieglut Lugh once before in an AIDA server. Someone had to be controlling her, even if that fake Osaka accent was just part of her role-playing.

*I can't forget what happened at Wailing Capitol Wald Uberlisterin either,* Ryou thought. The false God of Death, Cernunnos, attacked Haseo when Haseo tried to save Endrance. *Cernunnos was an AIDA monster... so then she'd have to be both an AIDA-PC as well as an AIDA-infocted Epitaph User for The Machinator, Gorre.* There was no way it was Bo. It had to be Saku.

"I think that kid is desperately trying to trap me within one of *The World's* stories," declared the beautiful Blade Brandier as he played with the bat.

"But why would she trap you in one of the stories?"

"Have you heard of those 'choose your own adventure' stories? You know—the mystery books where you get to figure out the identity of the killer? Some people who write fanfics for comic books and cartoons like to put themselves in the story. There's a character they identify with, so they create their own original character and fantasize about them interacting."

"So?"

"That's just it. I'm a key character in that kid's fantasy world. And the dream must take place in *The World.* After all, this is where thoughts become reality. I can empathize with how the kid feels, but I have my own story here. It's a story starring Mia and me.

“Last time this happened, I thought I’d lost Mia, so I was behaving self-destructively. But now I know I’m with Mia. I’m honestly getting fed of up being stalked all the time.”

Endrance pulled out Macha instead of a magical needle and scissors and chased after the bat in the room.

“Endrance?” Ryou had no idea what his companion was doing.

“Ugh!” Endrance looked frustrated. “It would seem that I’m playing the role of Tristan and that bat is Iseult. I can’t change the story.” Nor could he target the bat and attack it. “But Haseo, you probably could.”

“Me?”

“Pi and Atoli didn’t get dragged into this world, but for some odd reason, you did. That would make you the party-pooper. You should be able to target it. It’s just like how you were able to defeat the God of Death and destroy Cernunnos’s archetype. Now you must destroy Tristan and Iseult’s archetype for tragic romance.”

Haseo had to release his Avatar before anything else could happen. He targeted one of the main characters in the story.

“Take that!”

An ear-piercing screech rattled the room. Haseo felt as if his eardrums were going to burst. He managed to slice the bat in half with a single blow from his scythe.

The log cabin instantly vanished. The water in the lake began boiling, filling the air with the stench of sulfur. The

shooting stars plummeted, burning the forest so thoroughly that not even the ashes remained.

WHYYYYYY?

A fake Osaka accent echoed in Ryou's head. He got into a fighting stance. Endrance had been freed from the confines of the story, allowing him to wield Macha.

I DIDN'T SUMMON YOU HERE, HASEO. THIS IS A DREAM I'M SHARING WITH MASTER EN.

"No, this dream is yours and yours alone, you stalking freak," Endrance said, coldly rejecting Saku.

"So Endrance is Tristan and Saku is Iseult?"

"You can't have a story with only one character in it," Endrance explained. "She couldn't create her own story, so she tampered with a pre-existing one. But I have no interest in a world borrowed from others. That could never satisfy me." He was clearly addressing the last thing still remaining in this world: the moon.

YOU CAN'T MEAN THAT.

Saku's voice shook violently as it echoed throughout the dreamworld.

YOU CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! CAN'T! YOU CAAAAAAN'T!

Half of the moon fell into despair before transforming into a peculiar-looking doll with a ball in the centre serving as its base.

Its face looked as though someone had drawn eyes and a mouth on a cartoon sun, and its arms were like that of a stuffed animal.

It looked like some sort of warped mascot. The bottom half of it was composed of two plates that were attached to another ball sandwiched between them. A crescent moon decorated the top of the ball.

*Th~thump. Th-thump.* Ryous pulse quickened. Only the presence of an Epitaph could make his heart beat so loudly. He was looking at the Fifth Phase, Gorre.

“Saku is the Epitaph User!” The PC Sakubo was an Epitaph- PC that held the Fifth Phase, The Machinator, Gorre. Of the two siblings who shared the PC, it would seem that Saku, the sister, was the Epitaph User candidate.

“But that blue-haired guy Kuhn didn’t invite Saku to the museum.”

“That was her brother, Bo. Maybe they swapped out?”

“Whatever,” said Endrance dismissively as he assumed a fighting pose with his Avatar, Macha.

“Here she comes!” The second Ryou screamed out, the stuffed animal-like doll, Gorre, raised both its arms in an explosion of fury.

DIE!

Countless missiles shot out at them. Haseo and Endrance split up, one dodging to the left while the other escaped to the right. The missiles left a trail of AIDA bubbles behind them.

She was an AIDA-PC. That meant that Saku's player had been infected by the AIDA. The infection linked her dreams with her Gorre Factor, which allowed her to create areas in *The World.*

That's how she locked Kaoru's mind in the Wailing Capitol Wald Uberlisterin and now in *the World* of Sin Ran Hati. Saku's fantasies always took place in false Lost Grounds.

"We have to delete the AIDA infecting her Avatar—er, I mean the Gorre Factor or else—"

Gorre made its move, cutting off Ryou mid-sentence, and lifted a giant chakram over its head before throwing it at Haseo.

BLOOM OF DESTINY!

The circular blade sliced through the air. Haseo tried to block the attack with Skeith, but the chakram simply rebounded and struck Haseo in the shoulder. It shaved at his armor, sending sparks flying like a chainsaw hitting metal. Haseo couldn't predict where the chakram would strike next because of its curvilinear path.

"Ugh!" The chakram whipped around like a boomerang and attacked Haseo from behind. Shifting his grip on Skeith, he turned halfway around to face the oncoming weapon and thrust Skeith's blade up into the open center of the spinning

chakram. It appeared as though he'd just won a deadly game of ring toss. He used Skeith to change Gorre s trajectory and flung the chakram back at its master. But a second before the chakram hit Saku, it turned into mist and evaporated.

CURSE YOU, HASEO!

Gorre was in a fury. She swung her arms around like a child throwing a temper tantrum. The giant stuffed animal threw a punch at Haseo, which he was unable to fully block. The powerful blow sent Haseo flying. He felt as if he'd been clocked by a heavyweight champion. Actually, the force was beyond human strength. It felt more like a gorilla had socked him with all its might. He could have sworn his brain was shaking in his head. It throbbed so badly that Ryou began to lose consciousness.

*Ugh. ..*

YOU'RE A KNOW-IT-ALL JERK!

Gorre s transformation hadn't ceased. The plates and ball on her bottom half were covered in digital designs. She was transforming into something that resembled a floating fortress wrapped in coils.

The upper half of the doll with the sun-like symbol on it turned into a cannon and aimed for the groggy Haseo.

INFINITE SPIRAL!

The moon floated with the sun as Gorre shot out Data Drain. The coils had gained even greater destructive power

from the momentum of the spiral, allowing it to hit the target with unimaginable speed.

“Gwaaah!” A fuse blew out in Haseo’s brain as a result of him being caught in Data Drain’s mad torrent. She was interfering with the very data that created him. Saku wanted nothing more than to completely destroy Haseo. Ryou knew that Haseo would lose form the moment he lost consciousness. He was desperate to keep Haseo in one piece.

I DON’T WANT YOU! YOU’RE NOT WHAT I—!

Before Gorre could finish her sentence, a rapier pierced her from behind.

“I’m tired of being a character in your stories.”

It was Endrance. Macha stuck through Gorre s central sphere.

The sun-like doll on the upper half of Gorre seemed confused as she turned to look behind her. All she saw was Endrance’s cold smile. The young girl, Saku, asked:

WHY?

Her voice dripped with despair as black bubbles oozed from her wound.

Finally safe from the Data Dram assault, Haseo collapsed to the ground, unable to support himself. Gorre slowly began to lose its form. All of a sudden, all three of them were transferred to another dimension through a colourless flash of light.

They were in Avatar Space, another dimension where the players shared their memories. This time Endrance and Sakubo created it when their Epitaphs touched. As a result, they glimpsed Sakubo's player's memories; and because Haseo was present during the fight, he also got to view Sakubo's memories.

There was an elementary school student walking along the road. It was summer vacation. The kid, who was skinny and walked with droopy shoulders, must have been heading home after a trip to the pool, judging by the drawstring bag with a swimsuit and towel in it. It was impossible to tell if it was a boy or a girl based on facial features alone, and to make it more challenging, the child's hair was fairly long. There was a clear lack of vivacity one would expect to see in someone so young. The embroidered nametag had " 1st grade" and "2nd grade" marked out with a sharpie and "3rd grade" written next to them. But there was no way to tell how old the memory was.

Whether it was a boy or a girl, the child was probably one of the shortest kids in class.

Ryou saw a bit of himself in the kid. When he was an elementary school student, he contracted a virus that left him paralyzed. Only one in every hundred thousand people ever contracted the virus, so naturally he had no immunity against it. It spread into his peripheral nervous system, paralyzing his body and making it laborious to breathe. The virus eventually spread to his central nervous system, at which point he went into a coma—basically suffering a near-death experience. Luckily, he overcame the bug. The doctors said it was a

"miraculous" recovery and were amazed at how quickly he regained control of all his functions. Of course, he retained no memories of when he was in a coma, and he also lost most of his memories from just before and after the hospitalization.

After the incident, his parents became insanely overprotective.

Even before he became seriously ill, he'd been a thin, sickly child, and often missed school. But when he entered middle school, he grew taller and stronger. Middle school is also when he entered the typical "rebellious stage." His parents stopped worrying about him after that.

Sakubo's player, Iori Nakanishi, according to his nametag, really did remind Ryou of himself in his earlier years.

Ryou thought back to his previous experiences in Avatar Space with Endrance and Atoli. If those situations were any indication, he should be able to see the memories that influenced the player's psychology that in turn allowed Ryou to gain power over his own Avatar. The memories included people who were important to their owners, like how Shino was important to Haseo. For Endrance, it was Mia, and for Atoli, it'd been Sakaki. The memories that transpired were based upon what rested in the core of the individual's soul that needed to be resolved.

The memory suddenly jumped forward to Iori at home, placing his bathing suit and towel in the dirty clothes hamper and heading to the fridge for some barley tea. He gasped in horror as the glass pitcher slipped out of his hands and shattered against the floor. Barley tea quickly spread underfoot. Iori panicked and tried to go grab a towel, but stepped on some of the glass shards and cut his bare feet. He

looked down and noticed his feet were covered in blood. The pain made him wail like a baby trapped in a burning house.

His mother ran into the room, but she didn't console him—she laid into him, yelling things along the line of: *"What the heck are you doing?"* and *"Not again!"* and *"How many times do 1 have to tell you not to do this?"* Ion's mother was more distressed over having to clean up the glass than she was about her son's bloody feet. The boy cried, but his mother was unwilling to tend to him. He was overcome by a horrible feeling of guilt.

*"1 wish your sister was alive instead of you"*

The words echoed as time reverted back to the boys walk home from the pool. The young elementary school student crouched down and hugged his legs. He tried to block out everything around him.

Gorre vanished, leaving an unconscious Sakubo behind. The large grimoire she was holding tightly against her chest must have been her Avatar, Gorre. It'd been designed to look like a thick book placed on top of something resembling a music stand. Endrance had stabbed Gorre and deleted the AIDA.

"I. .. Why do I have to be this way? I'm so sick of everything," Saku said. She trembled as she held tightly onto Gorre.

"I wonder if Tristan really wanted to return Iseult back to her human form," Endrance whispered.

"Huh? What was that, Master En?"

"If he patches up the holes in the night's shroud, Iseult will revert to her human form, and their story will come to an end.

I doubt Iseult will forgive Tristan for turning her into a bat and making her suffer. Likewise, Tristan has probably become disillusioned because Iseult didn't turn out to be what he imagined. He's only able to love her forever if he sacrifices happiness in pursuit of rescuing her. If he didn't make that sacrifice, he wouldn't be able to keep his beloved Iseult all to himself."

"He's suffering forever for her. . . ."

"Love is nothing but pain, right, Mia?" said Endrance, hugging himself.

"No way. I don't want to suffer like that."

"Kids hate stuff that isn't fun. Why don't you give up then?"

"But I'll disappear!"

"I'll remember you, my little stalker."

"You mean it, Master En?" Saku smiled. "Then it's yours. You can have my entire story."

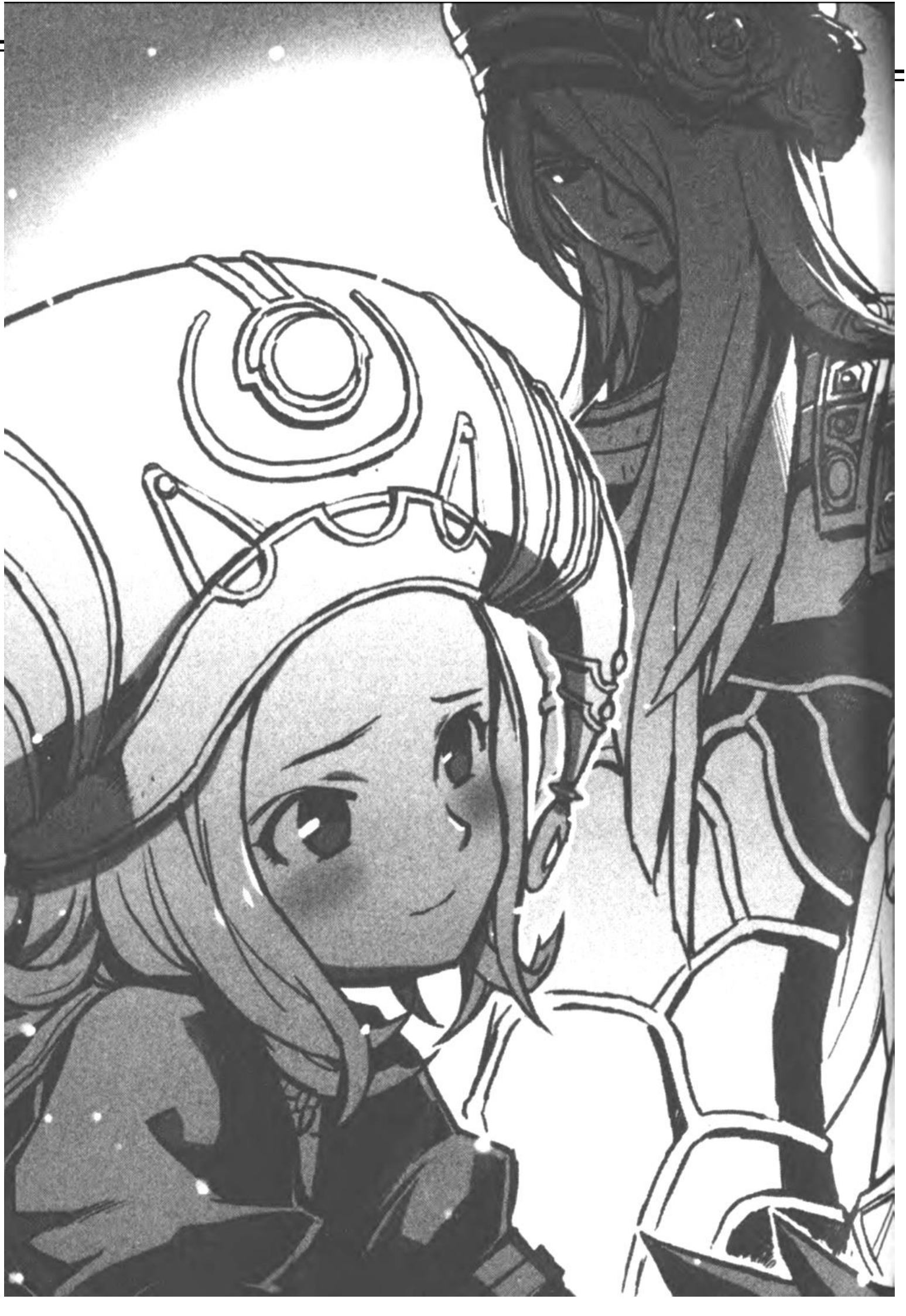
Saku's aura vanished along with the Avatar, leaving nothing but a PC behind.

"Endrance?"

"I saw Sakubo's memories," Endrance replied.

They shared memories in Avatar Space, and both Ryou and Kaoru saw Sakubo's player's remembrances.

"You too, huh?"



“ ‘I wish your sister was alive instead of you’? If Sakubo’s players were really brother and sister, that would mean his sister is dead.” In actuality, all he saw was the brother, Bo’s, memories.

“Then what about Saku? I only saw Bo’s memories. His sister Saku is the Epitaph User and you attacked her Epitaph, Gorre.”

“But that’s just it. Saku never played.”

“What do you mean?”

According to the *Banshouya Files,* only an Epitaph User candidate could use an Epitaph-PC. Saku had been infected by AIDA and created various areas with the Gorre Factor’s powers.

But if Saku’s player, Iori Nakanishi’s big sister, was already dead…

“It’s impossible to say. We didn’t see enough of his memories to know.” Endrance peered down at the unconscious Bo, who he’d assumed was Sakubo. “That stalker girl Saku was the fake. I mean, she entrusted me with her feelings and vanished, yet the Bo you knew from Canard is still with us.”

“So, basically, Bo’s player, Iori Nakanishi, was role-playing as his dead sister, Saku?”

It was a wild idea. Could only one persona get infected by AIDA and awaken with the powers of an Epitaph User?

“That power comes from the link formed between the player’s mind and his PC. Human science and philosophy

have spent hundreds of years trying to discern the link between the mind and the body and have come up with so little."

"I've abandoned common sense, but even so . . ."

"Did you know that people have several different personalities hidden within their subconscious mind?" asked Endrance.

"Multiple personalities, huh?"

"Sometimes people are forced to wear personas that don't match their true personalities, or they suffer from some sort of severe psychological damage. They try to erase the pain by cutting those memories loose. Their brain tells them that whatever happened occurred to another person, not to them. That's how they run from the pain."

"Do you think that's what happened to Sakubo's player?"

"He was a well-mannered and serious little boy who worried about what others thought. That kept him from doing what he wanted. When the boundary between his conscious and subconscious mind crumbled, his heart collapsed under the strain. Then something irreversible happened to him: He formed a multiple personality disorder. That's probably why Saku and Bo's personalities never appeared at the same time. Of course, there's also the fact that he's still only a kid forging his own personality. I suspect he had other intentions for this as well, but honestly, it's a doctor's job to figure that out, not ours," said Endrance.

Ryou decided to follow Endrances example and stop acting like a doctor analyzing Iori's memories. It didn't matter anyway, because the AIDA infecting Saku had been eradicated.

The moon disintegrated; its shards plummeted into the dried lake and sank into the sand. The fake Ran Hati and its

Forest of Pain fell apart. Ryou could feel his senses returning to his body in the real world.

## Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN EXHIBITION: BALBOL MUSEUM

By the time Ryou completely regained function over his body in real life, he was back in Balbol Museum. Endrance was there by his side.

"Haseo . . ."
"Bo?"

Bo stood up slowly. Iori had lost his persona as his big sister, Saku, and Ryou had no idea what to say. The boy's heart was still too young and fragile. He probably didn't even understand what had happened to him. Besides, Sakubo's player didn't need Ryou delving into his personal life.

Kuhn wasn't in the Chamber of Epitaphs, nor were Pi and Atoli.

The museum's floor suddenly trembled as if there was an earthquake.

"What's going on?"
"I think . . . it's coming from that direction," Endrance said as he directed everyone toward the exit.

All three of them returned to the Lost Ground's large hallway.

One of the pictures seemed to be thrashing to and fro .

"That's—1"

The clouds hanging over the swamp in the painting of Coite-Bodher Battlefield had been pulled apart to reveal the floating island.

*It's a dragon!* Ryou said to himself.

It had to be the petrified Battle Dragon Mag Mell. The eight stone monuments that composed the shrine that had sealed Mag Mell were illuminated. In the middle of the monuments floated magic glyphs.

Ryou's heart beat wildly. It felt as if his entire being was heaving along with his pulse. The feeling of exaltation overtaking his body was caused by the presence of another Epitaph.

*It's one* of *the Eight Phases!* One of them had to be in Coite-Bodher Battlefield, which used to be nothing more than ruins back when he was in the Twilight Brigade. It had become the source of great disturbance in *The World.*

The frame shattered, releasing upon the world everything that had been drawn in the picture.

# CHAPTER 03: REBIRTH

## ONE

Long, long ago, before there were heaven and earth, there were two brother gods who loved each other immensely. They found contentment and satisfaction in each other's presence. The world was them, and they were the world.

One day, the Elder Deity accidentally dropped the Younger Deity's beloved sword and broke it. The Younger Deity flew into a rage and broke his brother's beloved spear with his broken sword, leaving the Elder Deity incensed. The two commenced a battle with their defective weapons.

The fight lasted for seven days and seven nights. Just before the dawn of the eighth day, the Younger Deity realized how foolish they were behaving. He held his arms out wide and asked his brother for a truce.

However, the Elder Deity, blinded by rage, saw this only as a chance to attack and struck at the Younger Deity with his broken spear.

The Younger Deity's last gasp of air transformed into the sky, his body turned into the land, and the blood that spewed

upward from his body created the sun. His shattered sword trickled downward, forming the moon and stars.

The Elder Deity burst into tears, unable to bear the shame of having killed his once-cherished brother. The teardrops turned into rain and eventually pooled together to form the oceans.

That was how the world began.

Unable to endure his newfound solitude, the Elder Deity removed one of his eyes to create a sister. His sister named her majestic older brother Sol, the God of Creation. She was the Goddess of Harvest, Myulin. She then named the Younger Deity, who'd been locked away in Wailing Capitol Wald Uberlisterin, the God of Death, Cernunnos.

Thus, she gave all things and creatures names and purposes.

Sol created countless other gods—for the sun, the moon, the spinning wheel, and even the oven. He also created living creatures, such as trees, plants, fish, beasts, and insects. His final creation was the Elves. The gods and beasts blessed the Elves, allowing them to communicate with the other living creatures. Elves were also more powerful, more intelligent, and more beautiful than all other life.

Only the God of Death, Cernunnos, refused to bless the Elves. As such, the Elves' hearts shone with light, for they were ignorant of the darkness called "death."

Sol, God of Creation, bequeathed the land to the Elves before he created the City of Dawn, Airceltrai, and rose to the heavens. The gods ruled the heavens and the Elves ruled the land.

The Heavenly Path connected Heaven and Earth. The gods nourished the earth whenever they left their loft to visit the land.

It was believed that the Elves would prosper for all time, but as the years passed, they became arrogant, claiming that their power surpassed that of the gods. Not only were the Elves stronger, smarter, and more beautiful than all other living creatures, they had also never learned to fear the darkness. It was only natural for them to believe they were superior.

They used money and magic to create the Aerial City of Fort Ouph, from whence they commenced their attack on Heaven—for they had little opinion of the gods. Sol was furious at them for their treachery and retracted all of the blessings that had been bestowed upon the Elves. As a result, the Elves became more fragile and less intelligent than their fellow creatures. Now they were pathetic and weak.

Myulin, the Goddess of Harvest, renamed the Elves for what they had become: humans, the pathetic ones. Megin Fi, the holy mountain the Elves lived on, was transformed into a dragon.

Whenever the dragon moved, there would be a gigantic earthquake.

The Elves had not only lost their wisdom, but their legacy.

The Holy Capitol, Megin Fi, still stood on the back of the dragon, Mag Mell, and the Elves, virtually powerless, were too afraid of Mag Mell to attempt to fight back. Several generations later, in the fight against the gods, eight human heroes managed to contain Mag Mell. The dragon had been trapped in the sky, and completely turned to stone. Even now, there was no way of knowing what had become of the Elves' holy capitol.

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## Δ HIDDEN FORBIDDEN SACRED CAPITOL : INVERTED CITY MEGIN FI

Haseo was actually there, and through Haseo, Ryou was able to see everything. This was the floating island in Coite-Bodher Battlefield that he'd observed with Ovan and Shino back in his Twilight Brigade days. Haseo was standing on the back of the Battle Dragon Mag Mell, which had been turned to stone.

He'd finally made it. He felt that, at the very least, he'd surpassed the Ovan of six months ago.

"Is it because the eight awakened Epitaphs united?"

The eight heroes had the same names as the eight Epitaphs.

The altar they constructed as a seal thousands of years prior in Coite-Bodher had been reactivated and now opened the way to the Elves' lost holy capitol, the legendary Inverted City Megin Fi.

Everything seemed to fit together almost too perfectly, but this was a legitimate part of the background story. It wasn't a quest made by some game creators at CC Corp. The original creator, Harald Hoerwick, probably hadn't devised it, and Emma Wielant, whose online poem "The Epitaph of Twilight" served as the archetype for *The World*, couldn't have made it. It was part of *The World's* autonomy.

All of this was the direct consequence of the decisions the players involved in the story of Epitaphs and AIDA created through their subconscious and conscious actions and desires.

"Hmm."

"Wow . . ."

Endrance and Sakubo sighed in unison as they surveyed their surroundings.

All three of them were standing in the marketplace just in front of the gate leading to the sacred capitol's entrance. Megin Fi was originally located in a ravine. Multi-storey buildings were crammed together on the bluffs to either side. It was a stone city with countless penetrating holes, but the map showed only one path: a stairwell climbing from the bottom of the ravine clear to the top.

"It looks like there's no going back," said Endrance.

They'd been forcibly transported from Balbol Museum and there wasn't a single Platform in sight. Even the debug command had proved useless. They travelled from one Lost Ground to another and from one story to another. It was evident that Haseo and the other Epitaph Users were being drawn ever deeper into *The World's* vortex.

"I'm going"

If they were being drawn in anyway, they should go as deep as they possibly could.

"Might as well."

"I want to know where Kuhn is. And I'm worried about Pi and Atoli, too"

"May I go, too?" Sakubo asked timidly.

"No way. Listen carefully, Bo," said Ryou. "Remove your M2D and turn off your computer. It's important that you force your PC to log out."

Although it was likely that Bo's player, Iori, had awoken as an Epitaph User, he was still young and couldn't grasp the situation. Ryou didn't want the boy to be trapped in a dangerous situation like this.

"But . . ."

"I'll e-mail you later. We'll be just fine," Ryou said, trying to convince Sakubo to go. Ryou exchanged a quick glance with Endrance and began climbing up the slope.

Several thousand years had passed since the city had been abandoned. The harsh ram and strong winds that were common at this high altitude took their toll on the decayed path. But each and every stone step that remained of the Elves' sacred capitol had history engraved on it. They'd been entrusted with the history of antiquity.

There had to be something here. It was a mystery so weighty that if it was discovered, it could turn history upside down. If he were a historian, Ryou would've been brimming with excitement.

After Haseo passed through the arch-covered town, he approached the tower's main entrance. The tower's stone walls protruded from the cliff. The stairwell winding around them was so narrow that if two people were to pass each other, they'd have to hold their breath to squeeze by.

Ryou imagined that he was about to enter the most sacred area in the holy capitol.

When he passed through the tower entrance, he approached a large plaza directly in front of a mausoleum.

"That you, Haseo?" asked a blue-haired individual. Kuhn, the Lord Partizan, was standing there, waiting.

The only way to continue on was to get past him. Ryou had Haseo move forward.

"What are you doing, Kuhn?" Haseo asked bluntly.

"I'm trying to resolve the AIDA issue."

"Then talk to me. This isn't like you. You hated how secretive Yata always was. You're the one who wanted to handle stuff as a group."

When Haseo had been all alone, Kuhn was the one who offered a helping hand.

"But *I* have to deal with this."

"What do you—?"

"I'm going to save *The World.* I don't need Yata's help to do that; I just need *that man's* ***power*** He has the power to make everything come together. He actually does what he says he'll do, unlike Yata."

Kuhn wasn't going to let anyone get in his way.

"Who are you talking about? It can't be some CC Corp elite ... Has getting promoted from a part-time worker to a full-time employee gone to your head?"

"Bag it, Haseo! I have dreams too, you know! I have a life. You may be a 'net junkie, but you still have your mama to pay the rent and feed you three meals a day. I'm a professional part-timer! We aren't the same. I thought I was young, and I believed youth was my weapon. But I was wrong. I'm getting older day by day. All I have is right now, and right now . . ."

Haseo gestured for Kuhn to continue.

". . . this is my last chance!" Vexed, Kuhn materialized Magus and assumed his fighting stance, his blue eye gleaming with sad determination.

"Fine. I guess that shows you're just another adult, Kuhn."

"Adults as children imagine them and children as adults imagine them. Those are nothing but hollow images. It's merely a form of rejecting reality. Humans are only worth what they are in the here and now."

People were only worth what they'd accomplished at that moment. That was the ultimate deciding factor in life.

Ryou conjured his Avatar from the emptiness in his soul.

Epitaph Users were drawn together. The Terror of Death was being drawn toward The Propagation. It was only Haseo and Kuhn.

The two of them were best friends, despite their difference in age and the fact that they'd never met in real life. Both of them had been blessed by Morganna. They were like brothers, with the Epitaphs sealing their relationship. They identified with each other, which led to their deep, strong relationship. Haseo and Kuhn also shared the desire to save the Lost Ones.

This is why the sudden lean toward violence didn't make any sense. They hadn't discussed anything; Kuhn simply lunged forward and instigated battle. And now Ryou realized that here on the Inverted City Megin Fi, they were going to have to fight each other.

"Endrance, you go on ahead," Ryou told The Temptress's Epitaph User.

Endrance stood with his hand on his hip, lazily observing Haseo and Kuhn, trying to figure out what was going through their heads.

"But—"

"Go look for Pi and Atoli. I'll deal with this idiot," said Ryou.

He'd been worried about Pi and Atoli ever since they split up at Balbol Museum.

Stuck on the back of Mag Mell, the Inverted City Megin Fi had turned into *The World's* largest battleground. Epitaph Users blessed by the gods and their Avatars, the ultimate weapons, had gathered here to fight. Pi had undergone training, so she would be fine, but Atoli was just a normal person who'd only recently awakened to her powers.

Endrance sighed and whispered despondently to Kuhn, "You're a hot headed fool." Endrance slipped past him as he entered the mausoleum, but Kuhn didn't bother with him.

"Haseo, I promise I'll save Shino for you," Kuhn offered as a final attempt at compromise. "Please, just obey my orders."

"I'm not a member of CC Corp."

"But you're my friend!" Kuhn's kind expression matched that of the best friend that Haseo had always known.

"That's right."

"Then why . . . ?" Kuhn's piercing blue eye glared, turning everything they said into illegible text.

"I don't trust guys who keep secrets. What have you been doing behind my back this whole time?" Haseo tried to move forward, but Kuhn blocked his way.

The moment they ran into each other in this city was the moment all hope for true communication was lost. It was time for Avatars. That power was the materialization of their very souls in *The World.* They would have to hit each other with everything they had, leaving no room for compromise.

The fate or the autonomy of *The World* demanded the sacrifice of warriors. There was no backing down. Ryou had to stand strong.

*I'm betting everything on my Avatar* ... he thought.

Ryou was risking his life for Shino. He was surprised to see just how sharp Skeith s blade became as his resolve increased. The edge of his blade reflected the intensity of his memories of her. This was for the truth. He had to fight with a man who had saved him, and he had to fight for real. He had to fight, even if he lost all his limbs and was ultimately turned to stone. Otherwise, he'd never get the best of this man who dreamed of becoming a hero.

"I'm saying this for your own good . . . ," Kuhn said, pointing Magus directly at Haseo.

"I can't waste my time here," Ryou said. He couldn't let things end here. He figured it would come to this. The real world and the online world, the mind and the body, the player and the Epitaph-PC—this was happening because they both understood the meaning of such dualism.

"Let's finish this in one bout," Kuhn suggested.

Their Avatars glimmered ominously. The range of their attacks—the range of the Epitaph User's mind, rather—

created an invisible protective barrier. Haseo's range was a large circle, formed by the arc of his scythe's blade. Kuhn's sharp lance formed a straight line pointing directly at his enemy. Haseo would have to lunge forward or else his blade would never reach Kuhn.

Haseo slowly edged forward. All he had was a brief moment, but it felt like an eternity.

Kuhn rushed forward, prepared to strike with his lance.

All of a sudden, they both charged forward, still studying each other's movements, before they decided upon the perfect moment, and *WHAM!*

"Silent Jade!'' Kuhn shot out Data Drain and the world transformed.

"Ticking Death!"

Green and purple lightning struck with a clamour, sending sparks shooting violently in all directions upon impact. Their sense of awareness had reached its peak.

They were in Avatar Space, where Ryou was now viewing Tomonari Kasumi's memories.

The display screen showed the old *R:l* version of *The World.*

Tomonari's PC's was called Sieg, the name of the legendary hero from German lore. Sieg was a high schooler who admired the charismatic player behind Balmung, one of the Descendents of Fianna. He was the reason Kuhn longed to become a hero. Ryou had never played R: *1*, so all of this information came from sharing memories with Kuhn. An image of the explosion in Yokohama seven years before shot

across his vision. The disaster was aired on television constantly, and Ryou realized the images of the fire in Minato Mirai 21 he was seeing were the same ones Tomonari had seen on television. Ryou wondered if Kuhn's mind had compiled all of the events in chronological order.

The Second Network Crisis happened in 2010. Tomonari was Sieg at the time. According to the *Banshouya Files*, Sieg had been one of six victims. He was a Lost One, and ended up trapped in a coma.

That meant Kuhn was part of the Morganna Incident seven years ago. It was the first time Ryou realized that Kuhn had been a victim. It didn't take much for him to imagine how the experience must have affected Tomonari, who wanted to become a great hero that would ultimately save the world.

Toward the end of the montage of memories, a young lady appeared. She was a tiny thing with a bob haircut who disappeared into the depths of Tomonari's memories, to the other side of the border. Tomonari was always watching her, despite the fact that he could never have her.

…

Tomonari's Magus pierced Haseo in the chest and Ryou's Skeith sliced the width of Kuhn's torso.

Although it appeared that both attacks were fatal, that wasn't necessarily the case. They were communicating through their memories, which was far more powerful than any lengthy conversation. Weapons didn't mean much in a

battle between Avatars. It was all about trying to learn about and understand each other.

After the flood of information came to an end, silence enveloped the Inverted City Megin Fi. It was so quiet that Ryou could hear his breath.

"That was my past," Tomonari murmured, obviously hurt.

"Kuhn ..."

"It was an empty past. Actually, 'worthless' would be a better word, considering I didn't accomplish squat. You could write a summary of the twenty-four years of my life on a single sheet of paper."

He was regaining the "self" he'd lost. He was just like Atoli, who'd lost sight of herself in the real world.

Most likely all Epitaph Users suffered from the same problem.

Endrance had Mia, Sakubo had his sister—even Pi and Yata each had someone. All of them were subconsciously trying to fill a void in their hearts. Ryou was no different; he was attempting to fill the void Shino had left. His power was reflected by the emptiness in his heart, which is what allowed him to awaken his Avatar.

"I lost Sieg and became Kuhn, but even so ... I still sought self realization in *The World"*.

Tomonari desperately wanted to mature.

Ryou remained silent.

"I wanted to become strong, like a hero. I wanted to make the impossible possible, like Balmung of the Azure Sky, who could soar in the air. I wanted to do something great that would fill me with confidence. I wanted a title. . . ." If he had a title, he could stand proud the next time he saw Mai Minase, the girl from the memory.

Kuhn cried in reflection of how his player felt.

He was after the same thing Ryou had been seeking for the past six months.

"You wanted to mature?"

"That's right."

Their hearts were one. Ryou and Tomonari could identify with each other, which brought them even closer together.

"But Kuhn . . . you need to take a good look at what you've become."

Something was oozing from the wound Skeith dealt to Kuhn's torso, but it wasn't blood—it was black bubbles.

"AIDA?" Kuhn gasped, amazed at what he saw.

During its attack, Skeith burned off the AIDA growth that had formed on The Propagation's Epitaph-PC, which meant Kuhn was an AIDA-PC.

"Didn't you realize? I guess I never noticed, either . . . until I eliminated the AIDA in you," Ryou groaned.

Tomonari Kasumi had been infected with the horrible fever, AIDA. He'd dreamed of working for CC Corp and of becoming a hero, but when the AIDA infected him, it inverted all rational thinking and inflated his desires. An AIDA seed

had cleverly hidden deep within his Epitaph-PC. It was difficult to say for how long.

Kuhn's face went rigid. He was desperate to know why he'd been infected.

"GAAAAAAAAAHl" Kuhn howled in an attempt to reject reality.

Magus shone in all its brilliant beauty and then vanished. The blue-haired Lord Partizan looked haggard as he crumbled to his knees on the stone floor.

"Get a grip!" Haseo said as he grabbed Kuhn's shoulders with both his hands.

"What have I done . . . ? Ugggh!" Kuhn shrieked. The sound of his voice reflected his shattered will.

Kuhn was admitting defeat. His self-awareness that was once embodied by the virtual hero Kuhn was crushed under the weight of despair felt by Tomonari's subconscious mind. He threw himself to the ground. It appeared as though Tomonari didn't have the strength to move his fingers, which limply held onto his controller.

"I guess it really *is* impossible ... I can't be a hero or a valiant warrior warrior.''

"You idiot,'' Ryou snapped tersely. "Did Kite, Balmung, and the other heroes call themselves that seven years ago?"

Of course they didn't. It was the never-ending rumours on the 'net that labelled them as heroes. It was Jun Banshouya who said: "It is a human's dream to be a hero."

"Ugh ..."

"You're the one who told me: 'What can you do? Everything starts there. So get up,"' Ryou said to Kuhn.

Kuhn look surprised. "Do you forgive me?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"I swear, I'll never abandon you, just like you've never abandoned me!" Ryou promised.

"You're a good guy," Kuhn said as he smiled weakly.

There never was any hate between them. All they had to do was discuss things.

"This happened because you tried doing something new, Kuhn. You aren't clever enough to keep secrets the way Yata does."

"Seriously," Kuhn said. A wry grin spread across his face. "You aren't any different."

"Wha—?"

"Haseo, a bitter truth is awaiting you in that mausoleum,"

Kuhn said earnestly.

"A bitter truth?"

"He isn't a pushover like I am. Even Yata couldn't stand up to him."

Kuhn believed the man he was referring to probably implanted the AIDA seed in him and was behind what happened to Sakaki at Moon Tree, as well. Knowing him, he was likely also responsible for turning Yata into a Lost One, even though Yata had been in the Serpent of Lore.

Ryou tensed up, his heart pounded rapidly. "Who is it?"

"He's ..." Kuhn told Ryou the man's name.

Haseo's face blanched. He felt as if a horrible curse had been cast on him.

…

TWO

Perhaps the city abandoned atop the stone Battle Dragon Mag Mell still had some life left in it. After all, it was the lost race of the Elves' final legacy. The Inverted City Megin Fi existed before humans. The Elves built the magical dwelling on a sacred mountain before they lost the blessings of the gods and devolved into meagre humans. But the spell to turn everything to stone cast by the eight heroes during the war against the gods hadn't affected this city.

A narrow stream of spiritual energy that resembled water trickling from a nearly evaporated creak protected the green trees and added a sense of grace to the shrine built on the cliff. There was no sign of movement in the area, for no animals or birds dared approach it. The stairs that stretched from the bottom of the ravine to the top of the tower made it feel even more sacred.

Heaven and Earth. Towns and mountains. People and what they once were. The Inverted City Megin Fi was a place comprised of borders.

• • •

As Haseo entered the shrine, a blinding flash of light filled the space.

*What the—?* Ryou had to shield his eyes momentarily, but when he opened them, he noticed a shattered sword by his feet.

"Trident twin swords!"

The swords' master, a zombie in a glaring fluorescent orange patchwork outfit, was sprawled out across the floor. His arms and legs had been severed.

"You're late. You're always such a troublesome little boy."

Haseo spun around to find the unsavoury side profile of the arrogant former Guild Master of the Twilight Brigade. Ryou could feel his blood turn cold.

The former Guild Master could show up anywhere. Like some kind of trickster, he always did things when they were convenient for him and then ran off. Haseo always chased after him as if he were engaged in a crazy game of tag, but this time the former Guild Master had waited for Haseo. He'd waited to the point of boredom.

"Ovan!"

"I see you made it past Kuhn," said the Steam Gunner. If you paid close attention to his eyes behind his tinted glasses, you could tell he was impressed.

He wasn't only trying to praise Haseo, but he was acknowledging his ability.

"What you did to Kuhn—"

"Don't say something pathetic like I enticed him. Kuhn wanted to be a hero, and he used me to achieve his desire for self-realization.

*He* was the one who took AIDA, which is basically a narcotic. But he was defeated before he could bring his story to an end. *You* were the one who got in his way. Your story of trying to save Shino obliterated Kuhn's story of salvation."

Ryou wasn't sure what to say. Even if he wanted to say something in his defence, it was so difficult to put those feelings into words. He didn't stand a chance against Ovan in verbal combat.

Growing increasingly frustrated, Ryou pointed at Azure Kite's corpse on the floor and blurted out, "What *is* this guy?"

Ovan kicked the tattered zombie's head as if it were an inflated balloon, sending it into the air and back down, landing in front of Haseo's feet. His face looked identical to the hero's face seven years ago. The eyes on the head were wide open; the eyelids and lips convulsed as he tried to move them.

"He's my stalker," Ovan said with a grin. "He's been pursuing me."

"What?" Haseo said with a confounded look. He didn't get it.

When he first reunited with Ovan, he sent Haseo a personal chat saying, "He's going to appear today. You know the place."

Immediately following their first reunion in six months at Hulle Granz Cathedral, Azure Kite attacked Haseo, hitting Haseo with Data Dram and knocking him unconscious, which demoted his PC to Level-1. The strong psychological shock from the experience awoke Ryou's potential as an Epitaph User. It was his first step in fully awakening his Avatar.

But Azure Kite had been chasing Ovan.

Did that mean that the patchwork zombie had been after Ovan and not Haseo? From the zombie's perspective, Haseo had been in the way, leaving him with little choice but to

eliminate Haseo. Ovan managed to slip away while the zombie was preoccupied.

"Azure Kite, eh?" Ovan said, preparing to shoot his bayonet.

"That anti-virus is based off of the hero from seven years ago? I see the goddess of *The World* likes fairytales."

The sound of his gunshot resounded throughout the room.

The bayonet was probably another cheat item.

When the twenty-millimeter bullet hit the zombie, the force was so great that it broke open the hero's head like a watermelon smashed with a mallet. Everything turned to pulp in that one shot, even his facial texture and frame.

Ryou gulped.

"He's one of *The World's* automatic maintenance AIs," said Ovan. He turned his back to Haseo, leaving him wide open. Ovan looked head on at the mausoleum.

"AI?"

"He's something of a knight for the goddess Aura. He isn't a player—he's merely a program. He'll repair himself before too long."

Ovan thought that it seemed appropriate that *The World's* anti-virus took on the form of a PC, but at the same time, he felt that it didn't matter what the anti-virus looked like.

What Ovan said reminded Ryou of something from just after the AIDA server incident was resolved in Moon Tree. He'd stumbled across one of Tri-Edge's signs, as well as shattered twin trident swords.

*Had he been there, too?* Ryou wondered.

Tri-Edge must have been there! That meant something grave. Azure Kite, who Ryou had believed to be Tri-Edge, had carved a sign.

If he was an anti-virus, then it was his job to destroy anything that didn't belong in *The World.*

"Ovan . . . ," Ryou began, tensing up. He instinctively materialized his Avatar.

"Took you long enough," Ovan sighed. "You're so dim-witted and sluggish that you're actually quite cute, Haseo."

Haseo could see Ovan's eyes behind his tinted glasses glance up at the mausoleum's ceiling, but hesitated a moment before continuing to follow his gaze. He was uncertain about whether or not he should take his eyes off of Ovan.

While he was looking up, something small ran between Haseo's legs.

*Huh?*

At first it looked like a rat, but then it looked more like a primitive monkey. Had some animals managed to survive on the otherwise dead Inverted City Megin Fi? The prosimian deftly climbed up the vertical wall.

The Adept Rogue in black garb was unable to win against the temptation the fruit of truth offered. He was a beast of determination, yet he gave in and watched the creature as he held firmly onto his Avatar.

A bright mosaic picture on the magnificent rounded ceiling told a story. It was probably the myth about the Elves.

Although the mosaic was ancient, it had miraculously managed to maintain its vivid colours.

Ryou held his breath. There was Pi, the Tribal Grappler, and Atoli, the Harvest Cleric. Even the Blade Brandier, Endrance, had been pinned to the ceiling. They looked like statues up there. Instead of being whitewashed in the style of most statuary, they'd been covered in a black tar-like substance.

Out of nowhere, a blade as hot as a laser lacerated Haseo's cheek.

"Argh!" Haseo's eyes opened wide and his body went stiff at the thought that he could've been killed. If the enemy had wanted him dead, he could've made it happen. Then, Haseo would be affixed to the ceiling like Pi and the others. The stark realization sent Haseo into a cold sweat. His legs began to tremble uncontrollably.

*Plop.* A tepid black bubble dropped from the ceiling onto Haseo's cheek. Next, something that sounded like a chunk of heavy metal crashed to the ground of the mausoleum.

The characteristic lock that sealed the cast on Ovan's arm had tumbled to the floor, and the cylindrical part of the giant metal cast burst off of his arm and vanished. Ovan's real left arm along with a twisted black arm that was attached to his shoulder like parasitic caterpillar-like fungus was finally revealed. The grotesque hand had three hook-like fingers.

"You're . . ."

The black arm wasn't only covered in black bubbles—it was their source—and the source of the infection. The

prosimian scurried up Ovan's leg and onto his shoulders. It was clearly fond of him. Ovan fed it a fruit that resembled a walnut, which the prosimian deftly peeled open and bit. The fruit was oozing disgusting black bubbles, but the little creature ate the entire thing.

". . Tri-Edge?" Ryou finally uttered to Ovan as he fought to push down the anger, despair, and all of the other negative emotions he felt.

Tri-Edge's sign was carved deeply into the ground surrounding Haseo as if foretelling his demise. The left arm Ovan had kept secret made the sign.

"That's right."

"Was it because you're a deviance from the system?" Azure Kite, the AI anti-virus, had automatically gone after Ovan.

"Mhm. Artificially Intelligent Data Anomaly—AIDA—that would be me," Ovan proclaimed as he raised his arms to the mausoleum.

He was the AIDA called "Tri-Edge."

"But why?" Ryou asked.

"Tri-Edge's sign was carved onto Shino before she was Pked, and the mysterious PK Tri-Edge supposedly created these signs. Tri-Edge put Shino in a coma; therefore, Tri-Edge is an AIDA-PC. Your logic is simple, but accurate."

"I . . . called the wrong person Tri-Edge . . ." said Ryou remorsefully. Tri-Edge wasn't Azure Kite. "The one who's been making all these signs is . . ."

He was having difficult saying that Tri-Edge was the AIDA-PC Ovan out loud.



Ryou thought back to the sign left on the altar in Hulle Granz Cathedral, where Shino had been PKed. Ovan was there. They were the criminal and the victim. Ovan was at the cathedral with Shino on that fateful day perhaps seconds before Ryou sent Haseo to meet up with her.

Ovan raised his third arm, the arm that made him Tri-Edge.

He'd used his left hand to mess with everyone, including the three Epitaph Users hung up on the ceiling. He'd deceived Yata, who was now a Lost One, along with Kuhn. And the worst thing was, he'd messed with Haseo.

"Six months ago ... I hunted Shino," Ovan confessed with a sneer.

"Grrr!" Ryou's blood boiled as he swung his Avatar down.

*Why Shino?*

He bound across the room intending to use his death scythe to thrash Ovan's neck from behind, but Ovan effortlessly caught the weapon.

"You're such a beast."

As those four words left Ovan's mouth, a pain struck Haseo's face so fiercely that he nearly fainted.

Ryou tottered before regaining his balance, but recoiled from the sight of the shining "power" in Ovan's right hand.

"That bayonet . . ."

His heart beat audibly.

"The Eighth Phase . . . The Rebirth . . ."

"Corbenik."

The silver bayonet in Ovan's hand was undoubtedly an Avatar. It was as long as a large rifle, and was adorned with delicate engravings down the length of the metal. There was also something akin to a photon sword attached to the end. It was the butt of the gun that had hit Haseo in the face.

"Ovan, you're the last—?"
"I'm also the first Epitaph User."

Ovan was the Epitaph User for the Eight Phase, The Rebirth, Corbenik. That was it. That was the way it had to be.

"You hurt Shino . . . Why did you become a serial killer?" Ryou asked. He didn't understand any of this. Nothing made any sense.

He adjusted his grip on Skeith and approached The Rebirth's Epitaph User.

"Is that the truth you seek?" said Ovan.

Haseo was like a priest standing before God. But instead of a Bible, Ovan pointed his bayonet at Haseo.

"I'm serious." Haseo frantically pointed his scythe directly at Ovan. "Don't mess with me!"

Haseo swung Skeith at Ovan from the side, but Ovan's black arm easily countered the attack. The large scythe flew out of Haseo's hands and slid across the floor until it rammed into the wall and vanished.

"You can't defeat me," Ovan stated nonchalantly, as if Haseo wasn't a threat.

His left, AIDA-infected arm opened its hand. Now it looked like a living entity that could act of its own volition. It was even threatening him.

Haseo shook his arms, which had gone numb. He was dumbfounded at this display. *"You* control the AIDA?" he said as sweat covered his body.

Ovan was unique from all the other AIDA-PCs Haseo had encountered thus far. He was different from Endrance, who'd been deceived by an illusion of Mia, and he wasn't like Atoli, who'd unwittingly transformed into an Avatar when she went berserk. He was nothing like Sakubo, who had one of his two personalities get infected.

Ovan's relationship with AIDA was different.

"Not quite. We simply understand each other. AIDA and I are dangerous friends and . . ." Ovan was just about to say something but changed his mind at the last minute.

The AIDA arm that was like a parasite emerging out of his shoulder gestured as if to say, "What should we do now?" It was as if the thing was communicating on its own.

"Don't you dare underestimate me! I'm not the same as I used to be!"

Haseo needed Ovan to acknowledge his power. If he couldn't surpass Ovan, Shino would never . . .

"Even a dog can howl. Now show me what you've got, Terror of Death."

"My power!" Haseo's only power was his Avatar.

"RAAAAAAH!"

Suddenly, the giant scythe reappeared in Haseo's hands. It was a power that belonged solely to Ryou, because it was born from the Shino-shaped emptiness in his heart.

"Skeeeeeeiiiiiith!" he screamed from the very depth of his soul.

That name held all of Ryou's feelings for Shino in it. "Eat this!"

He brandished his life-reaping death scythe at the man he most admired and most detested in the world.

The dull sound of flesh and bone being severed echoed across the room.

Fresh blood splattered across Haseo's face. Then came the pain. It burned as badly as it throbbed. Agonizing pain like nothing he'd ever felt pierced at the nerve centres in his brain. Haseo's left arm had been cut off right at the shoulder and was dyed red by his own blood.

"Gwaaaaaah!" He gripped his shoulder and threw back his head as he screamed out in pain. Ryou was screaming out in pain in real life, too. Although his physical body still had both arms, it felt as if one had been cut off.

"We may have been in a stalemate, but still . . ." Ovan said coolly as he played with his parasitic black arm. "Did you truly believe the upper management in CC Corp would trust a suspicious hacker such as myself?"

Ovan had mediated through Kuhn to set up some sort of secret agreement between himself and CC Corp's upper management. He was an awakened Epitaph User and could communicate with AIDA.

Through Sakaki, he controlled the AIDA phenomenon at Moon Tree's @HOME as much as was humanly possible, which is what led to Yata's dismissal. CC Corp's upper

management ultimately rated Ovan as superior to Yata. The final chip in the trade had been Tri-Edge's AIDA.

"All we did, and for nothing," Ovan lamented.

Ryou wasn't expecting that. Even as the pain slowly eroded his consciousness, he was surprised by Ovan's unexpected grievance.

"It isn't here. The path to Airceltrai, the City of Dawn, isn't here."

The Inverted City Megin Fi was brimming with Elvin wisdom, but still, it failed to offer so much as a clue to the whereabouts of the Heavenly Path. The secret ceremony held in the mausoleum had been lost to antiquity.

"Airceltrai . . . and the Heavenly Path?"

Those were Ovan's allegoric phrases. Ovan was searching for the Key of the Twilight while investigating the autonomy of *The World.* Everything he did was a step toward communing with the ultimate AI, Aura.

*"Long ago, there was a goddess statue here"* Shino had once said to Haseo at Hulle Granz Cathedral.

*"What happened to it?"*

*" I guess she ran out of patience with this world"*

So they were searching for the missing goddess, Aurora, who was also the ultimate AI, Aura, the autonomy of *The World.* Although the way he phrased it may have changed, what Ovan sought now was no different than when he was part of the Twilight Brigade. Ovan had continued to walk down his path as a seeker for truth in *The World,* where thought became reality.

"I don't know of any other Lost Grounds. There is no world beyond the all-encompassing Morrigu Barrow Wall. It isn't in the sky here. So where could the Heavenly Path be? Where is the lovely Aura? I just don't know anymore. My heart has returned to the darkness it felt in the beginning," Ovan despaired.

Ryou had always considered Ovan to be on a higher plain than everyone else. The way Ovan defeated all of the Epitaph Users was proof enough. But here he was, and here his player was, in utter despair. Just how insignificant did that make Haseo in the eyes of *The World!* Getting Data Drained and reverted back to Level-1 didn't even compare with this.

"I don't know . . ." Ryou began. He'd sought the truth and now he struck out against Ovan's despair with his own. "You're so powerful, but that isn't good enough for you. You want Aura's power, too? What the heck are you after?"

But as expected, Ovan didn't answer Haseo's question.

"Was Shino and everyoune at G.U. not good enough for you?"

A strange insignia appeared on Ovan's face.

Haseo's legs began to quake. His consciousness was fading due to the blood loss. All of the sensations Ryou was feeling through the 'net game became distant. . . and then he remembered something. He could barely recall the hospital and his parents' faces. It was something his subconscious had forced him to forget—the time he got sick from that virus as a little boy. He felt the same now as when he lost consciousness back then.

“Haseo, that’s the reaper in your heart,” Ovan said as he began to transform.

*What the—?*

Now a human-shaped Avatar stood before Haseo in the mausoleum. It was exactly like with Innis and Gorre. The only real difference was its size. If he had to guess, Ryou figured the giant was more than thirty feet tall. Coming out of his left shoulder was a massive third arm—the Tri-Edge AIDA arm.

SACRIFICE YOURSELF TO MY DESPAIR.

Ovan had gone berserk as Corbenik.

CLINCH NEEDLE!

Corbenik hefted a giant ball that rapidly shot out countless needles over his head. The needles pierced through Haseo’s armor and cut into his flesh, filling his body with excruciating pain. Next Corbenik summoned several AIDA monsters to be created in his likeness.

VARIANT SUMMON!

A group of prosimians as tall as humans appeared. Their spindly hands reached out for Haseo’s head as *if* it were a piece of fruit they wanted to pluck off a tree and devour. Ryou had never faced a situation where a creature wanted to eat him before. He was terrified to the core, but he managed to frantically wield his scythe to defend himself. The AIDA prosimians screeched at him before fleeing as they bled black bubbles.

Ovan had obtained the power of a Morganna Factor, as well as the AIDA. It was as if he'd been blessed by both a goddess and a foreign god, considering he was able to control both powers at his will. He was a beloved saint and a terrifying sorcerer. He could make miracles. But Ovan's true power was his raging subconscious mind.

REVEAL YOUR TRUTH TO ME.

He wanted to see the entirety of Ryou Misaki's pitiful story, born of his vanity, glorification, and obsession. Ryou was terrified at the thought. Of all people, Ovan was the last person he wanted to see his memories.

Corbenik held his arms outstretched to Haseo, but they weren't beckoning him. Instead, they transformed into a cannon aimed directly at Haseo.

DEVIL'S VERDICT!

When the blast from Data Drain struck Haseo, a glaring light nearly blinded Ryou. The supposedly worthless memories in his heart were laid bare.

He was in Avatar Space, where only Ryou's memories were on display.

It wasn't just winter; it was *that* fateful winter day—the day he'd met Shino in Ikebukuro.

*“Shino?”*
*“Shino Nanao, that’s me”*
*“Ah, the same as your PC?”*
*“Unlike you, huh? Haseo isn’t Haseo out here, is he?”*

That was how they had introduced themselves.

Even now, Ryou could remember what Shino had been wearing: short boots, a pleated denim skirt, and a black knit top with a fur vest. He remembered how he thought he looked so cool when he first went to Ikebukuro. He’d bleached his hair and bought clothes that didn’t suit him, and wore uncomfortable pointy-toed shoes especially for the occasion.

He quickly realized he’d been overzealous and that it had all ended in failure. He wished for a second shot at meeting her for the first time, but knew that it was impossible. This was the first time he’d ever met with Shino Nanao. It was also the last day Ryou ever got to talk with her.

They met in an online game and from that day forward, they intended to expand that relationship into the real world. Ryou was planning to ask Shino to be his girlfriend. He’d fallen in love with this beautiful lady before him so deeply that she made his toes curl.

This was the real Shino. And this was the story that Ryou Misaki had written.

“What does it mean to feel emotion toward someone?”

"Ah!”

Haseo whipped around to find Ovan, with his Tri-Edge AIDA arm on his shoulder. Ovan could see Ryou’s memories

because he was a fellow Epitaph User. He'd forced his way into Ryou's heart with Corbenik's Data Drain. Ryou felt so embarrassed and vulnerable that he felt like bashing his head against the wall.

"What does it mean to love someone?" Ovan chuckled as he watched the story of Ryou and Shino in the real world unfold like some sort of candid camera TV show.

"Don't watch . . . Just get the heck out of here, Ovan!"

"To love is to hate. Don't you agree, Haseo? Or should I say Ryou Misaki?"

"Turn away. I don't want you seeing my memories!" Ryou screamed. "This is my heart!"

"The scars of youth," Ovan replied sympathetically in reaction to Ryou's bitter cry.

"Ugh!" This was a truth that Ryou had never told anyone.

"Confusion, regret, resentment ... If not hate, what would you call that mixture of feelings you've felt toward Shino since that winter day? Haseo, the bitterness you feel toward Shino for rejecting you created a void in your heart. That is how you gained your Avatar's powers."

"You're wrong. I'm going to save Shino!"

"Save her and then what? Ask her why you weren't good enough for her? Ask why you couldn't be her boyfriend in the real world?"

*"I'm sorry, Ryou, but. . "*

Ryou had expressed his love for her, but Shino reacted with a look of ambivalence and a nervous laugh. She ultimately turned him down in the nicest way possible.

“This is your true memory of that day. It’s the entire story behind Haseo. It’d make a pretty decent book for juvenile readers.”

Ovan aimed Corbenik toward the Shino in Ryou’s memories.

“Don’t you dare!”

“I’m afraid I don’t have enough time to waste it on a young boy’s fantasies,” Ovan said as a bullet blast out and shattered the image of Shino. In the same instant, Avatar Space disintegrated.

…

The Tri-Edge AIDA arm crushed Haseo in its hand before bashing him against the wall. It felt as if every bone in his body had been crushed. But the damage and pain done to his delicate heart had already broken his will to live. He slid slowly down the wall, leaving a trail of blood as he crumpled to the ground.

The black AIDA arm tore off Haseo’s left leg with the force of a bulldozer.

The only sound he could utter was the gurgling of blood in his throat. He’d lost an arm and a leg. It felt as though the sensation of losing blood would continue forever.

“You . . . had . . . everything!” Haseo stammered as he tentatively stood up. Although he was two appendages short, he assumed a fighting stance with his Avatar, Skeith.

“You’re smart and strong. You’re an adult, but you still talked about your dreams. You had everything I ever wanted!”

Haseo shouted. He lifted his head and glowered at Ovan in his transformed state. He'd admired Ovan . . .

"I was jealous of you," admitted Haseo.

Haseo was always looking at Shino, but Shino only regaMed Ovan. Ryou had always felt ill at ease whenever he saw the two of them talking. The more he trusted Ovan, the more jealous he became of his relationship with Shino.

"But look what you did to Shino!"

Ovan PKed Shino at Hulle Granz Cathedral and turned her into a Lost One. And for what reason? It didn't make any sense. Shino Nanao sleeping in that hospital was the only true reality. Visiting her at the hospital had become a daily routine. The true identity of the PK Tri-Edge, who'd stolen Shino from him, was the person who'd been closest to Shino and Haseo.

"White daisies"

Ryou held his breath, unable to respond to what Ovan had said so quietly. Shino's hospital room always had a vase of daisies in it.

"Shino loved those flowers, but I bet you didn't know that"

Everything began to make sense. Ovan's player had been visiting her hospital room. He had the nerve to visit her after stealing her time, her beauty, and her glorious smile.

Had he sent the flowers? Had this man actually done that?

“I won’t let a freak like you take Shino!” Ryou believed he was the only one with the right to care for her, and he was the only one who should save her. Shino was the only thing in the world he wouldn’t relinquish. “You can’t have her!”

Haseo launched into his attack with only his one arm and leg. Skeith stabbed Ovan directly in the chest.

It was a white room in which leather-bound books were scattered across the floor. A large easy chair was facing the opposite direction.

Ovan was standing in front of the chair.

They were in Avatar Space once again.

*Is this . . . Ovan’s memories?*

*“The Epitaph* of *Twilight’’* said the memory of Ovan. It appeared as though he was talking to someone sitting in the easy chair.

*“The Key of the Twilight, the ultimate AI, the Eight Phases of Morganna, and Harald Hoerwick,”* he said as he removed his glasses and stooped over the chair. His expression was one of sadness and pure love.

*“What melody would you like me to play—?”*

The memory came to an abrupt end, cutting Ovan off before he finished his sentence. Ryou’s mind had been blocked from Avatar Space.

“Is that all you’ve got?” Ovan asked, standing directly in front of Haseo. Although Skeith was still stuck in Ovan’s chest, it didn’t seem to faze him.

Epitaph Users obtained their power from the link they had with their PCs. When an Avatar attacked the PC, the player would feel pain in the real world. As things stood, Ryou was suffering awful pain due to Haseo having lost both an arm and a leg. But Ovan hadn't even winced. He took the hit to his chest in stride.

"Ovan, you—"

"I can't feel anything . . ."

It was as though he was impervious to pain. Unlike all of the other Epitaph Users, Ovan's player hadn't experienced an increase in sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, or even the sixth sense.

"As such, I cannot use The Rebirth's true power."

"What do you mean?"

"I awoke as an Epitaph User and gained the ability to use my Avatar. But since I can't feel pain, I'm unable to improve and reach greater heights."

Ovan stepped forward with Skeith still lodged in his chest. The blade plunged deeper into him until it reached the scythe's snath. Ovan remained perfectly at ease.

"What the—?"

"I'm after the same thing you are: pain. Pain experienced on the 'net and real life will help me realize my goal. Haseo, I thought you would be the one, but I see you aren't ready yet."

Ovan spoke his words of resignation as he calmly pulled Skeith out of his body. Haseo just stood there, unable to do anything.

"I hereby disband the Twilight Brigade."

"You're what?" Why the heck was he bringing up the Twilight Brigade now?

"My adventure was in vain. I tried to fill the world with the light of reason in my search for the gods, but it was fruitless." At the end of his adventure, he'd come to the Inverted City Megin Fi only to find that the Heavenly Path wasn't there.

"You mean the Twilight Brigade's journey is over?"

"Unlike Yata, I have no intention of observing and experimenting in hopes of finding the goddess's laws." That went against the policies that CC Corp's upper management held so firmly.

"Then what are you going to do now?" Ryou wondered if Ovan was going to continue deceiving others and sacrificing people for his own benefit.

"There is no ultimate truth. Everything is meaningless. How can a person who knows neither himself or pain speak of false truths? No, I know what I shall do. I shall bend those very truths to *my* will." He would force Aura to bend to him.

"There's no way!"

"I am The Rebirth, Corbenik," Ovan declared. "I will become a god."

He allowed Tri-Edge to loosen its savage grip upon Haseo, but only to beat Haseo like someone would beat a dirty rag. His body grew numb to the pain as his consciousness faded. His mind was no longer able to form clear thoughts.

"What do you think it means to grow?" Ovan whispered with a sigh as he allowed the Tri-Edge AIDA arm to continue its assault as if it were a pet dog playing with a toy.

"Everyone praises you if they think you've grown. It's almost a crime not to grow and mature. But you'll be criticized and reproached if you don't grow into the image everyone has of you. Is

growing into the form everyone desires and yearns for really all that wonderful?"

*I*. . . Ryou just wanted to get back everything he'd lost.

"That was why I struggled and fought so hard," he whispered groggily.

"Isn't growth merely recovering what was lost? In that case, growth is rather underwhelming and not something worthy of praise. It certainly isn't something people should celebrate. In fact, they should keep their mouths shut about it altogether. Others watching you as you grow and mature should be an intolerably embarrassing experience."

"Become strong," Ovan finally said in a saccharine tone as he continued to lynch Haseo. Despite his encouraging words, he peered mercilessly down at Haseo through his tinted glasses. "Become strong, Haseo. Devour and trample all of your happiness and sadness as you move forward."

An image of Shino when she was looking her best appeared in Ryou's mind.

*Shino* . . .

"Kill me! Fill me with the delicious wine called *pain"* Ovan hissed. He sounded like a big brother, a father, and also a demon.

**To be continued . . .**